

experience, and to give it status by associating it with the latest achievements in science and geometry. To this end, in his 1911 essay "Cubism and Tradition," the painter Jean Metzinger reached for the innovation of the space-time continuum of the fourth dimension, which could work to narrativize Cubism, writing:

Already [the cubists] have uprooted the prejudice that commanded the painter to remain motionless in front of the object, at a fixed distance from it, and to catch on the canvas no more than a retinal photograph more or less modified by "personal feeling." They have allowed themselves to move around the object, in order to give, under the control of intelligence, a concrete representation of it, made up of several successive aspects. Formerly a picture took possession of space; now it reigns also in time. In painting, any daring is legitimate that tends to augment the picture's power as painting. To draw, in a portrait, the eyes full face, the nose in semi-profile, and to select the mouth so as to reveal its profile, might very well—provided the craftsman had some tact—prodigiously heighten the likeness and at the same time, at a crossroad in the history of art, show us the right road.

The technique of the "cubists" is clear and rational. These are painters aware of the miracle that is achieved when the surface of a picture produces Space.

When Gris made an Analytical Cubist portrait of his compatriot Picasso in 1912, he followed this formula, drawing "the eyes full face, the nose in semi-profile, and [selecting] the mouth so as to reveal its profile." His imposition of a diagonal, lattice-like grid over the whole surface enforces the experience within it of the little shimmer of canted facet-planes that tie this representation to Picasso's own painstaking work of perceptual analysis. But already as early as 1913 Gris had started to adopt the larger, more decorative forms of Synthetic Cubism, in a triplicate of violins [7] that seem—Three Graces style—to present the observer with two side views of the instrument flanking its front face and thus producing the by-then standard formula according to which the Cubists "have allowed themselves to move around the object, in order to give, under the control of intelligence, a concrete representation of it, made up of several successive aspects."

It was not Cubism, however, that fully embraced Metzinger's movement around the object so as to portray it as "made up of successive aspects" but Futurism. In the first two decades of the century, the philosopher and public intellectual Henri Bergson was a sensation in Paris with his lectures at the Collège de France, enthusiastically attended by scholars, artists, and old ladies alike. His major work *Matter and Memory*, which he had published in 1896, transformed the aesthetic ideas of the Futurist leader, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, to reconsider space as a continuum of these very "aspects." Bergson's argument had insisted on the distinction between space and time by pointing out that space is measured in identical units each necessarily distinct from and



7 • Juan Gris, *Violin and Guitar*, 1913

Oil on canvas, 100 × 65.5 (39½ × 25¾)

outside the other (like the inches on a ruler); while time, he argued, is immutably fused within experience: the present retrospectively overlapped by the past and prospectively projected onto its future. The drive towards a representation of such fusion not only determined Giacomo Balla's repetition of continuous ▲ contours, but also led Umberto Boccioni to conceive a work such as *Development of a Bottle in Space* (1913) as a spiral revolving like a nautilus before a viewer to induce in that observer the experience of circling the object.

Yet the figure-ground reversal of Picasso's, Braque's, and Gris's greatest Synthetic works allowed the painting to maintain its obdurate frontality, the flicker of the illusionistically projecting and receding planes opening the minimal implication of a depth that no viewer could enter so as to "move around the object," and thereby grasp its "several successive aspects." No matter how Picasso and Braque were betrayed by their supposed followers, they always remained true to the formal logic that required a painting to remain parallel to and motionless before a viewer's eyes. RK

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The members of the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture define Constructivism as a logical practice responding to the demands of a new collective society.

 On December 22, 1921, Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958) presented a paper entitled “On Constructivism” to her colleagues at the Inkukh—the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture, a state research institution founded in May 1920 under the auspices of the Department of Fine Arts (IZO) of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros). It had been almost a year since the first director of the Institute, Wassily ▲ Kandinsky, had resigned, his psychology-based program being rejected as obsolete (if not plain counterrevolutionary) by a swarming group of newcomers marching behind Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891–1956).

As salaried employees of the state, the avant-garde artists and theoreticians who made up Stepanova’s audience had to follow bureaucratic routine and keep a stenographic record of the animated discussion that followed the talk. From this we can discern that what was at stake that evening in December 1921 was less the retrospective account of Constructivism offered by Stepanova than the anxious question it prompted about the future: how will the Soviet artist justify his or her existence once he or she has voluntarily abandoned any artistic activity but is yet without the technical knowledge essential for industrial production? (Note the gender qualifiers here: there was perhaps no other artistic movement in the first half of the century where women exerted such a powerful role.)

The Marxist critic Boris Arvatov (1896–1940), soon to become one of the most vocal hard-liners of Productivism, aptly summed up the historical weight of the moment. The artist will not be of any use to industry until he acquires some education in a polytechnic institute, he remarked, but his work nevertheless has a function at the ideological level:

It's Utopia, but we have to say it. And every time we say it we will be avoiding dogmatism and will not be shading our eyes and we'll be saying that this is real, and necessary, and nobody will reproach us for it. We have to explain the great thing that this doctrine [Constructivism] has brought. It's true that the situation is tragic, like any revolutionary situation. This is the situation of a man on a riverbank who needs to cross over to the other side. You have to lay a foundation and build a bridge. Then the historical role will be fulfilled.

▲ 1908. 1913

At the end of 1921, the Constructivists were at a crossroads. Since the spring of that year, Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP), characterized by a partial return to a free market, had been gradually replacing the centralized planning that had presided over Russia during the civil war, a system that had directly benefited members of the artistic avant-garde as a reward for their early and enthusiastic support of the Revolution. The Constructivists knew that the days of the Inkukh as they had shaped it—as a place where they could freely conduct their “laboratory experiments”—were over, and they embraced the changes to come. The bridge mentioned by Arvatov (that between “art” and “production”) had long been on everyone’s mind (its necessity had already been advocated with great rhetorical flourish in the pages of *Iskusstvo Kommuny* [Art of the Commune], the official journal of IZO published from December 1918 to April 1919), but one could now feel a distinct acceleration. A month before Stepanova’s talk, following a call by Osip Brik, a former ▲ member of Opoyaz, for them to transfer out of the jurisdiction of Narkompros into that of the Ministry of the Economy, the Inkukh Constructivists had collectively decided to abandon “easelism” and to shift to “production.” (The word “easelism” derives, of course, from “easel painting” but it was used to describe any kind of autonomous art object, including sculpture). Among the group, the most radical proponents of the Productivist program were even predicting the end of art altogether: Arvatov’s bridge had to be built to reach the other side, but it would have to be destroyed as useless once this heaven had been attained. To a large extent, this remained wishful thinking, and the concerns that were vented during the December 1921 evening would eventually be proven to be well founded. But if the glee with which the Constructivists had endorsed their resignation as artists now rings of something like a manic denial, it certainly could not have looked in any way suicidal at the time. There was a logic to their self-immolation which constituted the climax of a whole year of experimentation.

“The first monument without a beard”

The birth of Constructivism came as a direct response to Vladimir Tatlin’s model for the *Monument to the Third International*, often simply called his *Tower* [1]. Commissioned in early 1919, the

▲ 1915

model was unveiled in Petrograd on November 8, 1920 (the third anniversary of the October Revolution), before being shipped to Moscow, where it was re-erected in the building hosting the VIIth Congress of the Soviets at the very moment when Lenin's plan for the electrification of Russia was being debated. From the detailed pamphlet written by the critic and art historian Nikolai Punin and published on the occasion of the work's presentation, and from numerous declarations by the artist himself, we know that, while the model was a large wooden sculpture of between 18 and 21 feet high, the finished monument was to have been a huge metal-and-glass construction some 1,300 feet high—a third taller than the Eiffel Tower, at the time the tallest building in the world and a feat of engineering Tatlin had greatly admired during his trip to Paris before World War I. The most striking element of Tatlin's celebrated design was its tilted structure consisting of two dovetailing conical spirals and a complex web of oblique and vertical slats that framed four geometric glass volumes suspended on top of each other within its slanting core. Each of these volumes was supposed to be an independent building housing a different branch of the Comintern (the Soviet organization in charge of "spreading the revolution" to other countries), and each would rotate at a specific pace. The revolution of the lowest and largest volume, a cylinder destined to house the International's "legislative assemblies," was to take a year; that of the second volume, an oblique pyramid for

Soviet institutions

As had been the case during the French Revolution in the eighteenth century, finding a name for a new institution, or renaming an old one, became highly charged political acts in revolutionary Russia, from the very first days of the February 1917 insurrection to Lenin's rise to power in October 1917 and well into the Stalinist era that followed his death in 1924. And the baptismal frenzy of the young Soviet state did not only affect official organizations, but also the many avant-garde groups that had multiplied in the teens, during the heyday of Cubo-Futurism. The absurdist monikers of these prerevolutionary groups (such as Knave of Diamonds, The Donkey's Tail, Tramway V) still smacked too much of the Symbolist past they had been intended to mock. A new linguistic form had to be devised to signify that a radically new era was beginning, and for both the Bolshevik power and that small fringe of the intelligentsia that immediately put itself at its service, the acronym became the prime signifier of such a *tabula rasa*. It was both economical and "poetically" unfamiliar.

The political nature of this linguistic device was established early with the coinage of Proletkult (for "Proletarian Culture") in 1906. Although this organization worried Lenin to the point that by 1909 he had excluded its leader Aleksandr Bogdanov from the Bolshevik party, it was only after the "ten days that shook the world" that it took real stride. But the new government countered its rise by founding an umbrella department, the Narkompros (for "People's Commissariat of Enlightenment"), headed by the liberal Anatoly Lunacharsky, whose domain encompassed cultural affairs, propaganda, and education, and under which all artistic groups—including the recently created Komfuts (for "Communist Futurists")—had to be subsumed. In January 1918, IZO, the visual arts section of Narkompros, was created and placed in Petrograd under the supervision of David Shtenberg, a well-traveled, francophile, eclectic modernist painter who did his best to satisfy the diverse tendencies of the Soviet avant-garde as well as reorganize all art museums of the USSR. His deputy in Moscow was Tatlin.

Among the many new institutions launched by Narkompros were the Svomas (for "Free State Studios"), founded in 1918 and replaced in 1920 by the Vkhutemas ("Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops"), which can be characterized as the Soviet equivalents to the Bauhaus, the design school that had recently opened in Germany; the Inkukhuk (for "Institute of Artistic Culture"), founded in Moscow in 1920 (its first director was Kandinsky, soon evicted by Rodchenko) and its pendant in Petrograd, the Ginkukhuk, where Malevich took refuge after the close of his own school in Vitebsk, Unovis ("Affirmers of the New Art") in 1922. Even after the restoration of private business by the NEP in 1921, the government's hold on cultural affairs did not falter, neither did its penchant for acronyms: in 1922, the Inkukhuk became part of the Rakhn ("Russian Academy of the Sciences of Art"), where it quickly lost its edge, and the AKhRR ("Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia") began its steady ascent, which would end up ten years later in the brutal establishment of "Socialist Realism" as the official line in all the arts.



1 • Vladimir Tatlin, First model of the *Monument to the Third International* in the former Academy of Arts, Petrograd, 1920. Wood, height c. 548.6–640 (216–252)

the executive branch, would have lasted a month; that of the next volume, a cylinder for the propaganda services, would have taken a day; and that of the uppermost volume, a small hemisphere added late in the elaboration of the project, would have presumably lasted an hour.

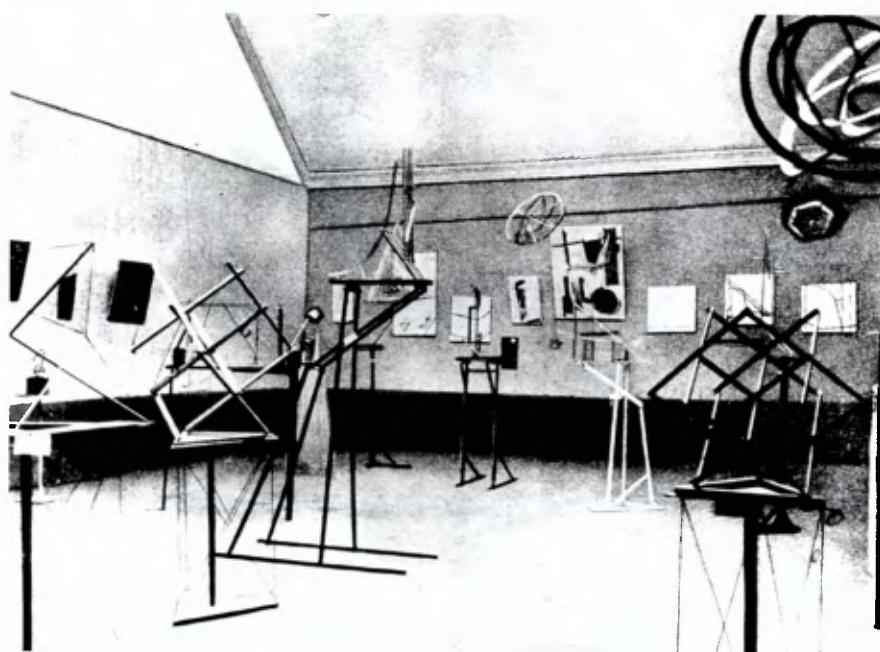
Tatlin and his friends (most notably Punin as his official spokesman) developed three lines of argument in favor of the actual construction of the monument on its projected, vast scale. First, as opposed to the eyesores erected in various places to commemorate the Revolution, it would definitively be "modern" (the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky celebrated the project as "the first monument without a beard"), which meant for Tatlin that it was in strict obedience to the principle of the "culture of materials" (that is, of "truth to materials") he had been developing in his sculptural ▲ reliefs of 1914–17. Second, it was to be an entirely functional, productivist object (Mayakovsky also called it "the first object of October"), surpassing, in yet another sense, the Eiffel Tower, whose principal use was as a radio antenna. Third, like all public monuments, it was conceived as a symbolic beacon: it spelled out "dynamism" as the ethos of the Revolution.

At the Inkukh, the formation by Rodchenko and his friends of the Working Group of Objective Analysis, which precipitated Kandinsky's demise as director, had preceded by just a few weeks the unveiling of Tatlin's monument. Given the enormous attention that this project received in Moscow at the time, it is not surprising that the Working Group focused on the issues it raised. The fact that it was an experimental design unlikely ever to be built (although it was declared technically possible by a team of Soviet engineers) did not deter them—on the contrary, the very fact that a project could have such an impact was an encouragement to pursue "laboratory work." Bracketing for the moment the concern

for production and functionality, the members of the Working Group concentrated on the model's two other aspects, its "truth to materials" (or *faktura*) and its symbolic dynamism (or *tectonics*), which were seen by Rodchenko and the others as being contradictory in Tatlin's project. They felt that at the material level, and contrary to Tatlin's argument, nothing justified the formal use of a spiral and the appeal to an age-old iconography. The *Monument* was a romantic affair, they argued, elaborated by a lone artist in the secrecy of his studio and with the traditional tools of his craft; its formal organization remained an indecipherable secret that reeked of "bourgeois individualism": it was not a construction but an authorial composition.

The construction/composition debate

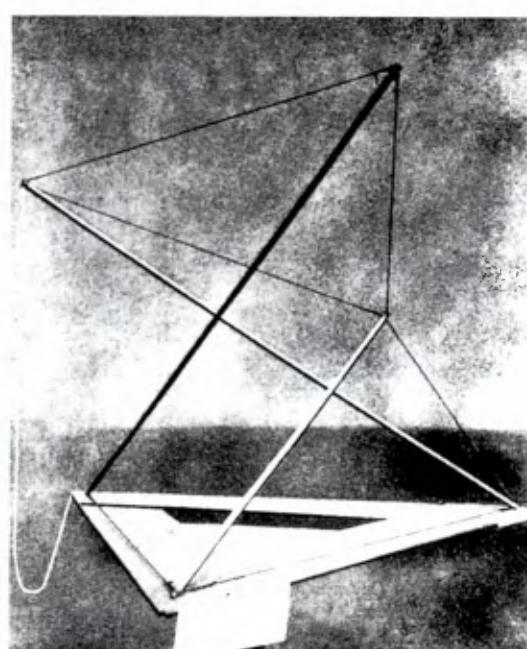
But those terms were too loose and had to be properly defined: from January 1, 1921, to the end of April, the Working Group conducted a lengthy debate centering upon the very notions of construction and composition. Each participant had to demonstrate, by means of a pair of drawings, what they understood of these two opposing words. Except for the drawings of Nikolai Ladovsky (1881–1941) and Karl Ioganson (c. 1890–1929)—both proposing as "construction" what would be labeled much later a "deductive structure," that is, a formal division of the surface that is predicated by the material properties (shape, proportion, dimension) of that very surface—the resulting portfolio is somewhat disappointing. Either the opposition was confused by a change of technique (*sfumato* for composition, sharp edge for construction) or by the evocation of a change in medium (a sketch of a painting versus that of a sculpture); or, especially in the case of Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982), construction was simply under-



2 • The Obmokhu group exhibition, Moscow, May 1921

Karl Ioganson's *Study in Balance* can be seen on the extreme left.

▲ 1914



3 • Karl Ioganson, *Study in Balance*, c. 1921

Medium and dimensions unknown (destroyed)

stood as anything with a machine look. But the written statements

and the many discussions that accompanied the production of these drawings are most enlightening. After much polemicizing, sometimes very harsh, a consensus was reached: construction was said to be based on a “scientific” mode or organization in which “no excess materials or elements” were involved. Or to put it in semiological terms, a construction was a “motivated” sign, that is, its arbitrariness is limited, its form and meaning being determined (motivated) by the relationship between its various materials (which is why it cannot borrow iconographical elements, for example), whereas a composition was “arbitrary.”

This conclusion seems at first a rather meager result for four months of intense discussion, and the rhetoric of the debate was undoubtedly naive (“excess” = “waste” = “bourgeois epicureanism” = “morally condemnable”), but it is nevertheless from this lengthy forum that Constructivism as a movement arose: the term itself emerged during the debate, and Rodchenko quickly monopolized it, in March 1921, by forging with his closest allies the Working Group of Constructivists (it consisted of five sculptors or, rather, creators of “spatial constructions”—himself, Loganson, Konstantin Medunetsky [1899–c. 1935], Vladimir Stenberg, and his brother Georgy [1900–33]—who were joined by Stepanova

and, from outside the Inkhuks, the cultural agitator Aleksei Gan

[1889–1940]). Gan, who had just been expelled from Narkompros for his extremism, was immediately put in charge of writing a Constructivist program, and a lot of debating among the Group evolved around his obscure terminology. Gan’s confused and polemical prose (his book *Constructivism* appeared in 1922) is of no great help in assessing the thinking of the Group, and it is most unfortunate that this peripheral figure should have been assigned the central position of spokesman (it would prove particularly damaging, much later, when Stalin’s commissars were on a repressive rampage, but it would also long distort the view of historians of the movement). Much more to the point is the artistic activity of the other founding members in the immediate aftermath of the construction/composition debate.

One farewell to art

A key event is their participation in the second group show of Obmokhu (Society of Young Artists), in May 1921, which consisted mainly of “spatial constructions” [2]. Even though only two of these sculptures survive, this legendary exhibition is well documented. Neither the works of the Stenberg brothers, which



4 • Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Oval Hanging Construction No. 12*, c. 1920

Plywood, open construction partially painted with aluminum paint, and wire, 61 x 84 x 47 (24 x 35½ x 18½)

resemble metallic bridges, nor the polychrome sculptures of Medunetsky (one of which was bought by Katherine Dreier at the “First Russian Exhibition” in Berlin in 1922, and is today at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven) abide by the strict definition of construction proposed during the debate. The first do not go beyond Tatlin’s conception of the “truth to materials”; ▲ the second are clearly indebted to Malevich’s painting. But Rodchenko’s suspended sculptures and Ioganson’s “Spatial Cross Series” testify to the major step accomplished in a very short time. Both series of works were conceived as demonstrations of a “scientific” (which meant at this time dialectic, materialist, Communist) method: there was no a priori conception (no borrowed image); every aspect of the work was determined by its material conditions.

In the case of Rodchenko’s suspended sculptures, a single sheet of plywood coated with aluminum paint was cut out into concentric shapes (either a circle, a hexagon, a rectangle, or an ellipse—the latter being the only surviving example of the series [4]). These were then rotated in depth to create various three-dimensional geometric volumes: the sculpture could easily be folded back into its original planar condition, thereby laying bare the process of its production. Ioganson’s works exhibited the same pedagogical directness. In one of them in particular [3], set on a triangular base and consisting of three rods maintained in space through the tension of a connecting string, Ioganson attempted to give a visual and measurable form to the “excess” that every construction should aim to eradicate: the string was longer than required, but this “excess,” clamped at the end of the tense loop and hanging limp, also had a demonstrative function (to lower the three pointed rods and thus transform the sculpture, one had only to release more of the string’s slack). In other words, in contrast with the bourgeois artist’s studio secrets, the sculpture’s “logical” mode of production and deductive structure were heralded as a means of opposing the fetishization of artistic inspiration.

The same could be said of the modular sculptures that Rodchenko realized soon after the Obmokhu exhibition (each of which is made of equal-sized woodblocks, the plan sometimes being equal to the elevation). The formal logic that presides over these works, once again a deductive structure, is close to that enacted by the ■ Minimalists forty years later (Carl Andre would sing their praises when photographs of them appeared in the West). And it is not by chance either that such a logic should have had similar effects in both historical periods, no matter how dissimilar were the contexts of revolutionary Russia and late-fifties New York Bohemia as far as the status of painting was concerned. Carried to the extreme in this medium, the reductive direction upon which the Inkukh Constructivist had embarked could only result in either the pure grid or the pure monochrome: within the parameters of abstraction, any other pictorial possibility would involve an opposition between figure and ground, thus giving rise to imaginary space, composition, ■ “excess.” And just as Donald Judd would condemn painting for its incapacity to entirely shed illusionism, Rodchenko said farewell to this art after having shown his famous monochrome triptych at the



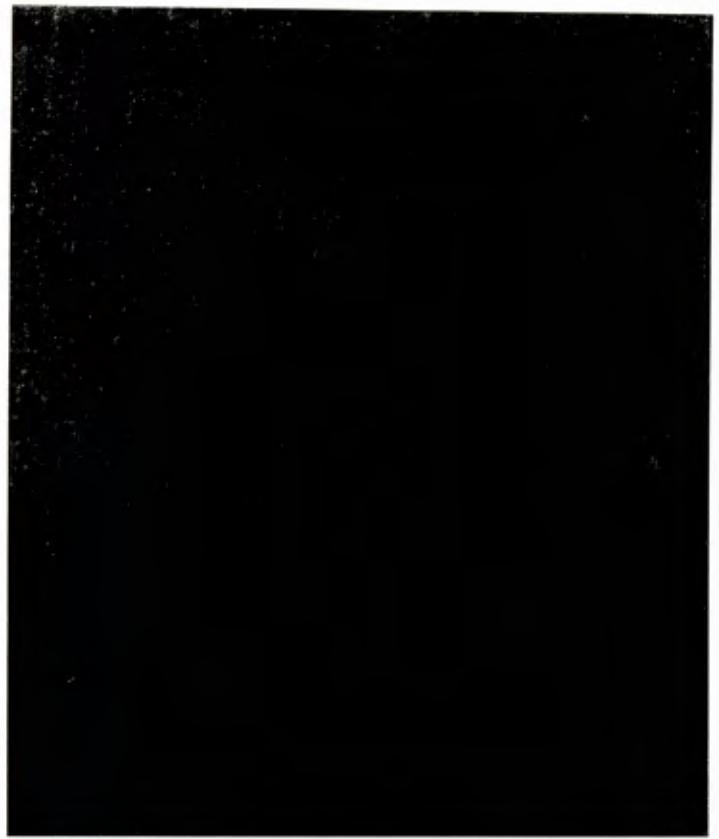
5 • Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color*, 1921
Oil on canvas, 62.5 x 52.5 (24½ x 20½")

exhibition “ $5 \times 5 = 25$ ” in September 1921 [5]: “I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, and yellow,” he later wrote. “I affirmed: It’s all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane, and there is to be no more representation.”

Rodchenko’s iconoclastic gesture quickly became a legendary landmark (nicknamed “the last picture,” it is described as a ▲ turning-point by Nikolai Tarabukin, a former Formalist critic who had become the most astute ideologue of the Inkukh group, in his 1923 treatise *From the Easel to the Machine*): with it a page of history had been turned, a point of no return had been reached. Analysis was no longer the order of the day: there was now no other possible path than to “enter production.” Stepanova’s December 1921 paper was a memorial service. The elaboration of a Productivist platform would be the central preoccupation of Rodchenko and his friends during the early months of 1922.

The move to propaganda

But despite their enthusiasm and their willingness to “work in the factory,” the Constructivists-turned-Productivists were to meet a depressing reality: in the New Economic Policy of Lenin they could no longer count on the blanket support of the state. To their great chagrin, their services were not welcome: they were either seen as an interfering nuisance by the new entrepreneurial cast of production managers, or derided as intellectual parasites by the workers. Stepanova and Liubov Popova successfully created a line



of textile designs that were mass produced (these constitute perhaps the only success story of the Productivist utopia, but it remains a minor achievement); Tatlin, too, managed to work in a factory, but he could not endure for long the task he was asked to perform (merely that of decorating objects), and none of the utilitarian objects he designed once he had returned to his studio was ever realized industrially (most notably a hideous stove destined to minimize the use of fuel; a bentwood chair that is, paradoxically, one of his most elegant sculptures; and a Leonardesque flying machine, a kind of winged bicycle that he called *Letatlin*, from the contraction of his name with the verb “*letat*,” to fly). Division of labor, which the Constructivists, as good Marxists, had first chided as being conducive to alienated labor, but then paradoxically endorsed when Lenin had declared it essential to the reconstruction of Russia, had turned against them. Only Loganson, who had been the most technically creative of the Constructivists (although he was, at most, in his very early twenties), managed to participate actively in the production of objects: he was hired as an inventor. In another context his talents would have thrived (his Obmokhu sculptures were similar to the tensile structures proposed by Kenneth Snelson and Buckminster Fuller in the late forties and early fifties, now called “tensegrity systems” and considered today a major step in the history of building technology). But no one was there at the time to recognize that for once the bridge called for by Arvatov had been crossed: all in all, the output of hard-core Productivism is pretty slim.

However, the new ethos devised in early 1922 bore important fruits: not in the production of everyday functional objects, but in the field of propaganda. If usefulness was the motto, and even if industry could not see a way to put artists to use, then they could at least be enlisted in advertising the Revolution (or even the objects produced, without their help, in state-owned factories). From the early twenties on, the creation of posters, theater sets, agitational stands, exhibition, and book designs became the chosen domain of ▲ the Constructivists, and with continuing success. As Tarabukin had predicted, their realizations in the ideological realm (that of imaging the Revolution) became their most important legacy. Rather than presiding over the production of objects, they had shaped the ideology of Production: they had found a niche, at last, within Soviet Russia’s ever-intensifying division of labor. YAB

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Hans Prinzhorn publishes *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*: the “art of the insane” is explored in the work of Paul Klee and Max Ernst.

In the first decades of the century, many modernists drew on “primitive” art, while some also mimicked the art of children (e.g., the Blaue Reiter Expressionists). By the early twenties a third interest—the art of the insane—completed the set of exotic models. Today, these three might strike us as odd, but for modernists like Paul Klee they were natural, even necessary guides in the search for “primal beginnings in art.” This points to a persistent paradox of the modernist search: that expressive *immediacy* would be pursued through the *mediation* of artistic forms as complex as tribal objects and schizophrenic images.

The reassessment of the art of the insane followed that of primitive art. Either dismissed out of hand or viewed in diagnostic terms, such art was ready for reevaluation. Yet most modernists saw it only according to their own ends: as intrinsically expressive, boldly defiant of convention, or directly revelatory of the unconscious, which for the most part it was not. The Romantics had also viewed the primitive, the child, and the insane as figures of creative genius unfettered by civilization. But in the modernist version of this trio the medium shifted from the verbal (poetry) to the visual (painting and sculpture), and the recovery of the art of the insane was complicated by its denigration after Romanticism. For by the middle of the nineteenth century this art was viewed less as a model of poetic inspiration than as a sign of psycho-physical “degeneration.” A key figure here is the Italian psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso, who, along with his Hungarian follower Max Nordau, spread this ideological notion to several discourses. Lombroso understood madness as a regression to a primitive stage of psycho-physical development—a model that prepared a phobic association of primitive, child, and insane, which persisted in the twentieth century alongside the idyllic association of the three as creative innocents. In *Genius and Madness* (1877), a study of 107 patients, half of whom drew or painted, Lombroso detected this degeneration in “absurd” and “obscene” forms of representation.

Schizophrenic masters

This discourse of degeneration continued through psychiatry into psychoanalysis as it emerged in the late nineteenth century; and the diagnostic reading of the art of the insane persisted too. Like

his French predecessor Jean-Martin Charcot, Sigmund Freud extended this approach through reversal, as he looked for signs of neurosis or psychosis in the work of “sane” masters like Leonardo or Michelangelo. By the turn of the century, with the clinical work of the German Emil Kraepelin and the Swiss Eugen Bleuler, focus fell on schizophrenia, which was understood as a broken relation to the self, as manifested in a dissociation of thought or a loss of affect—in any case, in a disruption of subjectivity marked by a disruption of image-making. This diagnostic approach was challenged only gradually, first with *L'Art chez fous* (1907) by Marcel Réja, the pseudonym of the French psychiatrist Paul Meunier, who examined the art of the insane for insight into the nature of artistic activity per se, and then with *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration* (1922) by Hans Prinzhorn, who pursued this line of inquiry in a way that was provocative to several modernists.

Significantly, Prinzhorn studied art history (at the University of Vienna) before he turned to psychiatry and eventually to psychoanalysis. This unique training led the Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic to appoint him in 1918; there he studied and extended its collection of art to some 4,500 works by 435 patients, most of them schizophrenics, from various institutions. With 187 images from this collection, his book included a “theoretical part,” ten case-studies of “schizophrenic masters,” and a summary of “results and problems.” It was thus very selective; it was also often contradictory. On the one hand, Prinzhorn aimed not to be diagnostic; he saw six “drives” active in schizophrenic representation, but present in all artistic composition as well. On the other hand, Prinzhorn did not seek to be aesthetic; indeed, he cautioned against any direct equation with “sane” art, and, even as he called his ten favorites “masters,” he used the archaic term *Bildnerei* (“artistry” or “image-making”) in his title, in contradistinction to *Kunst* or “art.” Nevertheless, Prinzhorn did refer to van Gogh, Henri Rousseau, James Ensor, Erich Heckel, Oskar Kokoschka, Alfred Kubin (who studied the art of the insane), Emil Nolde, and Max Pechstein. And further connections were made first by modernists, then by enemies of modernism—most infamously in the 1937 Nazi exhibition “Entartete ‘Kunst’” (“Degenerate ‘Art’”) which attacked modernists like Klee through this association with the mad [1].



Zwei „Heilige“!!

Die obere heißt „Die Heilige vom inneren Licht“ und stammt von Paul Klee.
Die untere stammt von einem Schizophrenen aus einer Irrenanstalt. Daß diese „Heilige Magdalena mit Kind“ immer noch menschenähnlicher aussieht als das Werk von Paul Klee, das durchaus ernst genommen werden wollte, ist sehr aufschlußreich.

„Ethik der Geisteskrankheit.“
„Der Besessenen wahnsinniges Reden ist die höhere Weltweisheit, da sie menschlich ist . . . Warum haben wir diese Einsicht gegenüber der Welt des freien Willens noch nicht gewonnen? Weil wir äußerlich die Herren des Wahnsinns sind, weil die Geisteskranken von uns vergewaltigt werden, und wir sie daran hindern, nach ihrem ethischen Gesetz zu leben . . . Jetzt müssen wir den toten Punkt in unserem Verhältnis zur Geisteskrankheit zu überwinden trachten.“
Der Jude Wieland Herzfelde in „Die Aktion“ 1914.



1 • Paul Klee, *The Saint of Inner Light*, 1921, juxtaposed with a work by an unknown schizophrenic, in the brochure for the Nazi exhibition "Degenerate 'Art,'" 1937 (texts translated below)

Two "Saints"!!

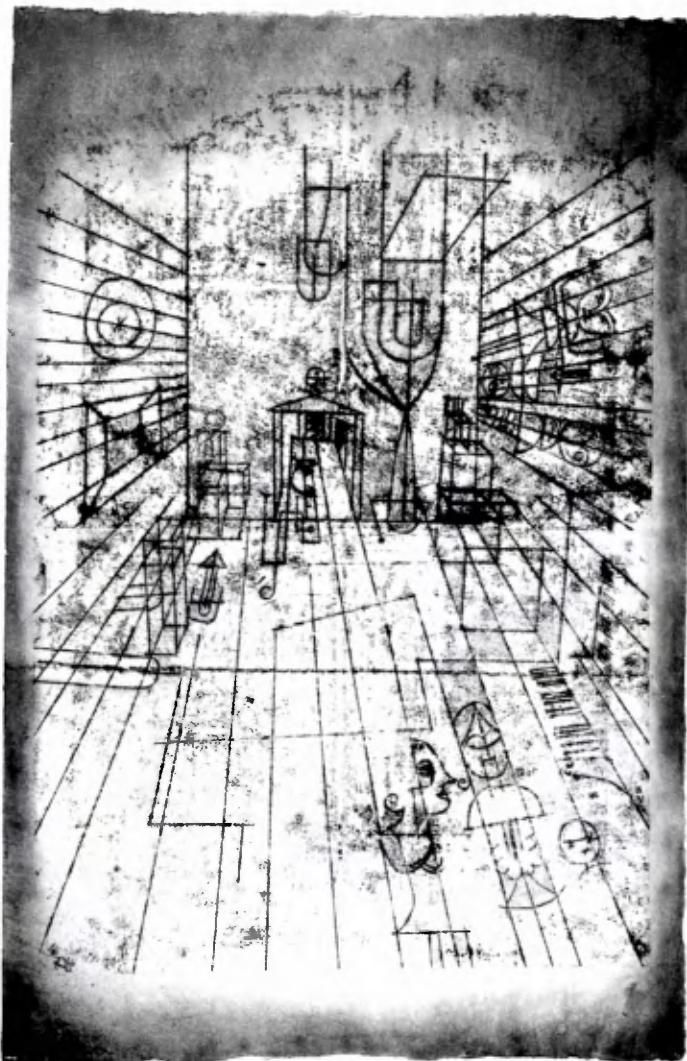
The one above is called "The Saint of Inner Light" and is by Paul Klee.

The one below is by a schizophrenic from a lunatic asylum. That this "Saint Mary Magdalena and Child" nevertheless looks more human than Paul Klee's botched effort, which was intended to be taken entirely seriously, is highly revealing.

"Ethics of Mental Illness"

"The crazy talk of obsessives is the higher wisdom, for it is human.... Why have we yet to gain this insight into the world of the free will? Because, superficially, we are in command of insanity, because we do violence to the mentally ill and prevent them from living in accordance with their own ethical laws.... Now we must seek to overcome the blind spot in our relationship with mental illness."

The Jew Wieland Herzfelde in "Action" 1914.



2 • Paul Klee, *Room Perspective with Inhabitants*, 1921

Watercolor and oil drawing, 48.4 x 31.5 (19 x 12½)

As his allusions suggest, Prinzhorn was interested in Expressionist art; his art-historical and philosophical models also inclined him toward a psychology of expression. Hence the six "drives" that govern the "artistry of the mentally ill": drives toward expression, play, ornamental elaboration, patterned order, obsessive copying, and symbolic systems, the interaction of which was said to determine each image. But here, too, Prinzhorn risked contradiction. For drives toward expression and play suggest a subject open to the world in a way that the other drives do not; on the contrary, compulsive ornamenting, ordering, copying, and system-building suggest a subject in rigid defense against the world (whether internal or external), not in empathic engagement with it. Even as Prinzhorn posed the former drives as correctives to the latter, he came to admit this essential difference between artist and schizophrenic:

The loneliest artist still remains in contact with reality.... The schizophrenic, on the other hand, is detached from humanity, and by definition is neither willing nor able to reestablish contact with it.... We sense in our pictures the complete autistic isolation

and the gruesome solipsism which far exceeds the limits of psychopathic alienations, and believe that in it we have found the essence of schizophrenic configuration.

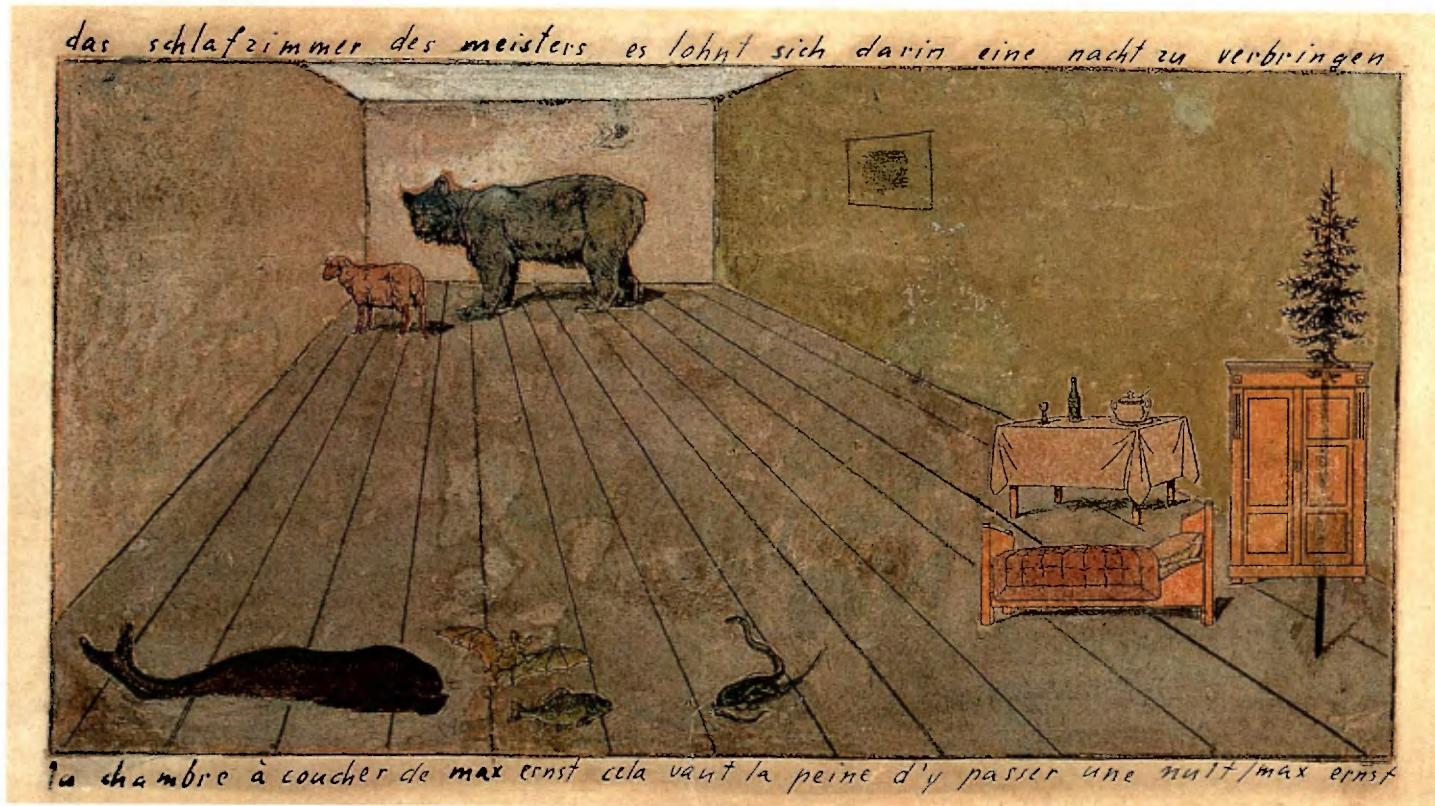
The modernists most engaged by the art of the insane were Klee, the German Dadaist-turned-Surrealist Max Ernst (1891–1976), ▲ and Jean Dubuffet (1901–85), the French founder of *art brut*; all knew *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* well. Klee and Ernst often contrived fantastic systems that sometimes mixed forms of writing and drawing—what Kraepelin once disparaged as the “word and picture salad” of schizophrenic representation. They also often experimented with bodily distortions that evoke psychic disturbance more than formal play. Klee sometimes enlarged the eyes or heads of figures (a common trait in the art of children, too), or extended other features into ornamental patterns (a tendency of schizophrenic representation noted by Prinzhorn), as in the scrolled wreaths and wings of his *Angelus Novus*, a drawing owned • by Walter Benjamin, for whom it was an allegorical angel of history-as-catastrophe. Even more disruptively, Klee sometimes repeated certain parts of the body (like the face) in other parts, as if to literalize a schizophrenic sense of self-dislocation; Dubuffet did much the same thing.

This apparent anxiety about body images could prompt a paradoxical treatment of boundaries in Klee and Ernst as in schizophrenic art. Sometimes boundaries are effaced, or exaggerated, and sometimes they are exaggerated to the point of effacement again—as if, in the attempt to underscore the lines

between self and world necessary to a sense of autonomy, these distinctions were undone. Klee evokes a collapsing of figure and ground, a merging of subject and space, in *Room Perspective with Inhabitants* [2]. The anxiety about boundaries could also prompt a counter to this collapse—a paranoid vision of the world as estranged, and hostile in its estrangement. Ernst evokes this alienation in *The Master’s Bedroom* [3], where both the odd occupants and the skewed space seem to gaze back at the artist-viewer in threat, as if a traumatic fantasy, long repressed, had suddenly returned to possess its “master.”

In-between worlds

In 1920, in the midst of his involvement with the art of the insane, Klee wrote his famous “Creative Credo,” which begins: “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.” This principle points to the special status of the primitive, the child, and the insane for Klee: as inhabitants of an “in-between world” that “exists between the worlds our senses perceive,” they “all still have—or have rediscovered—the power to see.” This power is visionary for Klee, and as early as 1912, in a review of the Blaue Reiter, he deemed it necessary to any “reform” of art. And yet, just as Prinzhorn wanted to see schizophrenic art as expressive, only to discover that it is often radically *inexpressive*, that is, expressive only of withdrawal, so Klee wanted to see an innocence of vision there, only to discover an intensity that often bordered on terror—the terror of the subject lost in space, as in *Room*



3 • Max Ernst, *The Master’s Bedroom*, c. 1920

Collage, gouache, and pencil over a page from a schoolbook, 16.3 x 22 (6 1/8 x 8 1/8)

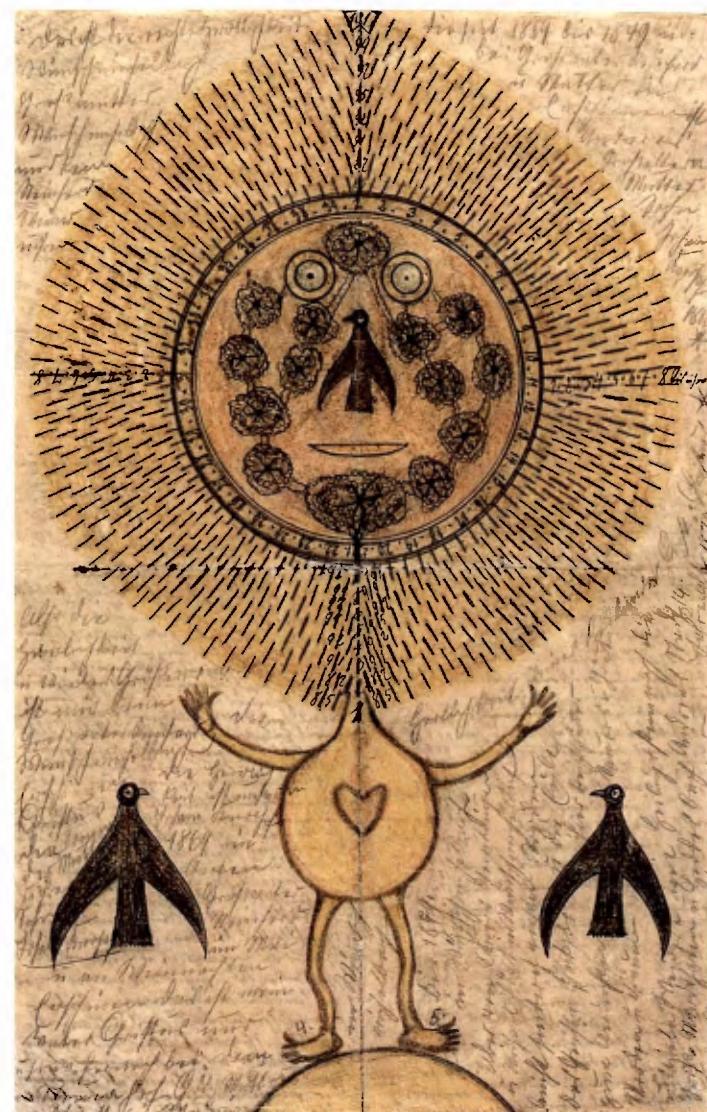
▲ 1924, 1946, 1959c

● 1935

Perspective with Inhabitants, or of visible objects become viewing subjects, as in *The Master's Bedroom*.

▲ According to Oskar Schlemmer, his colleague at the Bauhaus school of art and design, Klee knew of the Heidelberg collection before Prinzhorn lectured near Stuttgart in July 1920; and according to another colleague, Lothar Schreyer, Klee identified with work represented in *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* upon its publication in 1922—and this at an institution, the Bauhaus, renowned for its rationalism. “You know this excellent piece of work by Prinzhorn, don’t you?” Schreyer has Klee remark. “This is a fine Klee. So is this, and this one, too. Look at these religious paintings. There’s a depth and power of expression that I never achieve in religious subjects. Really sublime art. Direct spiritual vision.” When Klee simply illustrates “religious subjects,” as in his “angels,” “ghosts,” and “seers,” he often does not achieve this “power of expression.” However, when he evokes “direct spiritual vision,” he often approaches it—an expression that “makes visible.” Yet precisely here Klee runs the risk of a primal vision that, far from innocent, is hallucinatory—the risk of an image that possesses the artist. This state, too “direct,” too “sublime,” is evoked in some schizophrenic representation, such as *Monstrance Figure* by Johann Knüpfer [4], one of the ten Prinzhorn “masters” whose work Klee would have known. A “monstrance” is a “making visible”; in the Roman Catholic Church it is an open or transparent vessel in which the Host is displayed for veneration. But this “monstrance figure” is monstrous—an image that, however obscure to us, appears too transparent to the “religious vision” of its schizophrenic maker, the intensity of which shines through untamed. Some Klees catch a glimmer of this same intensity, and it burns away his innocent idea of the art of the insane.

Ernst had no illusions about the innocence of schizophrenic representation; on the contrary, he exploited its disturbances for his own antifoundational ends—to disrupt “the principle of identity” in art and self alike. Even before World War I he had encountered the art of the insane during his studies at the University of Bonn (which included psychology); at one point, he planned a book on such images. “They profoundly moved the young man,” Ernst wrote in his art-treatise-cum-auto-analysis *Beyond Painting* (1948). “Only later, however, was he to discover certain ‘procedures’ that helped him penetrate into this ‘no man’s land.’” Already in his early Dadaist collages made in Cologne, Ernst not only assumed a quasi-autistic persona, “Dadamax,” but also imaged the body in quasi-schizophrenic guise as a disjunctive, dysfunctional machine. These estranged schematic images are more caustic than the ironic mechanomorphic portraits of fellow Dadaists Duchamp and Picabia, for they point to the narcissistic damage produced by the war (in which Ernst was wounded). In one collage based on a found printer’s proof, *Self-Constructed Small Machine* [5], the body is a bizarre broken apparatus. On the left is a drum figure with numbered slots, on the right, a tripod personage, suggestive of a camera and a gun, as if the subject of military-industrial modernity were reduced to



4 • Johann Knüpfer, *Monstrance Figure*, 1903–10

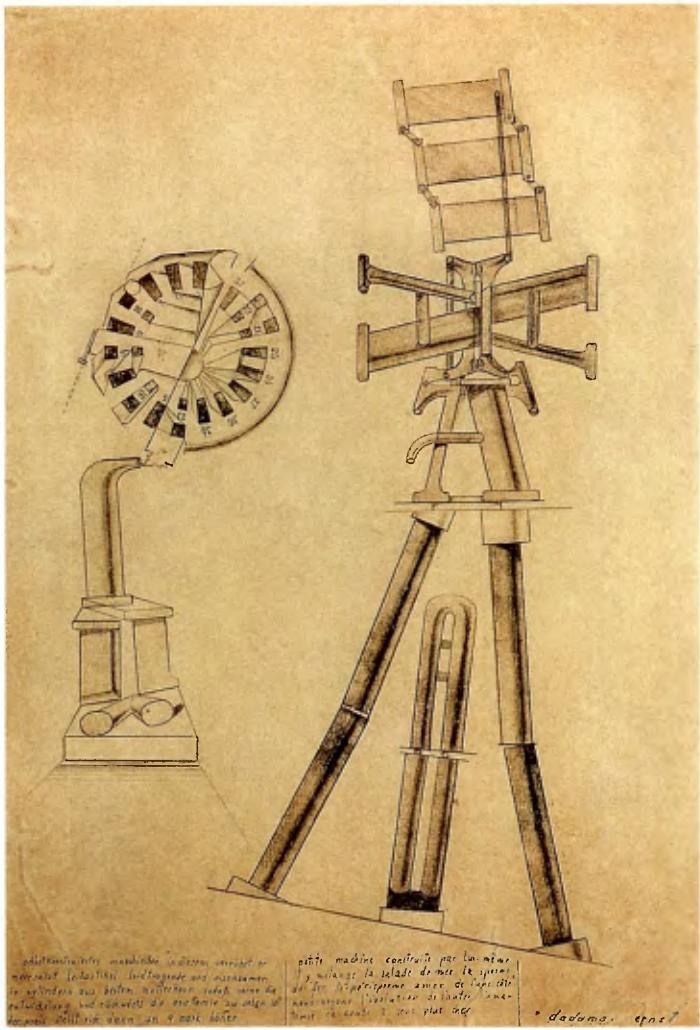
Pencil and ink on writing paper, 20.9 × 16.4 (8 1/4 × 6 1/4)

1920–1929

two functions: those of recording machine and killing machine. Below runs a confused account of this armored “anatomy,” in German and in French, that conflates sex and scatology, as a child or a schizophrenic might. This “self-constructed small machine” is indeed reminiscent of a mechanical substitute for a damaged ego, as found in some schizophrenic representations, but it is a substitute that only debilitates this ego further. In his alienated self-portrait, then, Ernst evokes the *development* of the military-industrial subject as a *regression* to broken functions and disordered drives.

Traumatic fantasies

These early collages (which include, as in *The Master’s Bedroom*, “overpaintings” on found representations from old schoolbooks) ▲ were crucial to the definition of the Surrealist image. They “introduced an entirely original scheme of visual structure,” André Breton wrote when they were first shown in Paris in 1921, “yet at



5 • Max Ernst, *Self-Constructed Small Machine*, c. 1920

Stamp and pencil rubbings of printer's block with ink on paper, 46 x 30.5 (18½ x 12)

the same time [they] corresponded exactly to the intentions of Lautréamont and Rimbaud in poetry." Lautréamont was the nineteenth-century poet-hero of Surrealism whose enigmatic line—"beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table"—was adopted as its aesthetic motto. Already the French poet Pierre Reverdy had defined Surrealist poetics as "two realities, more or less distant, brought together." Now, with the example of the Ernst collages, Breton could also define Surrealist art as "the juxtaposition of two more or less disparate realities." Such juxtaposition is a principle of collage, but, as Ernst once remarked, "Ce n'est pas la colle qui fait le collage" (It's not the glue that makes the collage); other "procedures" might produce this catalytic effect as well. Key here is the connection between a disruption in representation and a disruption in subjectivity, and it is difficult to imagine this aesthetics of dis/connection without the model of schizophrenic art. Indeed, when Ernst moved to Paris in 1922 to join the Surrealists-to-be, he brought a copy of *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*—as a gift for Paul Éluard, who in the same year collaborated with Breton on a poetic simulation of madness titled *Immaculate Conception*.

Ernst connects disruptions of image and self in *Beyond Painting*. The book opens with a "vision of half-sleep" dated "from 5 to 7 years," in which little Max watches his roguish father make "joyously obscene" marks on a panel. This first encounter with painting is cast in terms of a "primal scene," which Freud defined as the fantasy of parental intercourse through which children tease out the riddle of their origins. Ernst uses this trope of the primal scene in the origin stories of all the procedures "beyond painting" that he introduced into the Surrealist repertoire—collage, *frottage* (an image produced through rubbing), *grattage* (an image produced through scraping), and so on. Through such procedures he sought to "desublimate" art—to open it up to psychosexual drives and disturbances. Again, his hallucinatory ideal seems underwritten by schizophrenic representation: "I was surprised," Ernst writes of these experiments, "by the sudden intensification of my visionary capacities and by the hallucinatory succession of contradictory images superimposed, one upon the other, with the persistence and rapidity characteristic of amorous memories."

In this way Ernst worked not only to deploy traumatic fantasy in art, but also to develop it as a general theory of aesthetic practice: "It is as a spectator that the author assists ... at the birth of his work.... The role of the painter is to ... *project that which sees itself in him*." Here again, with the primal scene in mind, Ernst positions the artist as both a participant inside and a voyeur outside the scene of his art, as both an active creator of his fantasy and a passive receiver of his image. The visual fascinations and sexual confusions of the primal scene govern not only his definition of collage—"the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them"—but also his description of its purpose—to disturb "the principle of identity," to "abolish" the fiction of "the author" as unitary and sovereign. His provocative images effect this disruption formally more than thematically. For example, even as *The Master's Bedroom* alludes to a primal scene, it is in the formal dis/connection of the image—its contradictory scale, anxious perspective, mad juxtaposition (table, bed, cabinet, tree; whale, sheep, bear, fish, snake)—that traumatic fantasy is evoked, paranoid affect produced. Such are the "procedures" that helped him penetrate this no man's land" of schizophrenic representation. HF

FURTHER READING

- Max Ernst.** *Beyond Painting* (New York: Wittenborn & Schultz, 1948)
- Hal Foster.** *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004)
- Sander L. Gilman.** *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985)
- Felix Klee.** *Paul Klee: His Life and Work in Documents* (New York: George Braziller, 1962)
- Hans Prinzhorn.** *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, trans. Eric von Brockdorff (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1972)
- Werner Spies.** *Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, trans. John William Gabriel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991)

The Bauhaus, the most influential school of modernist art and design in the twentieth century, holds its first public exhibition in Weimar, Germany.

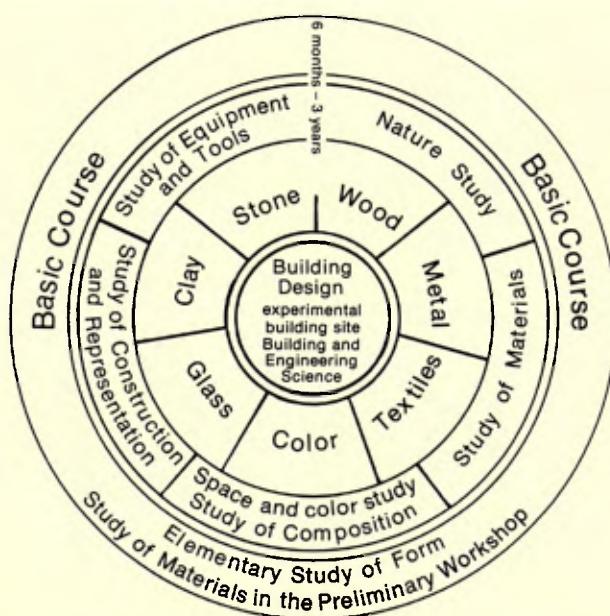
The Bauhaus was born with the Weimar Republic in 1919, and died with it at the hands of the Nazis in 1933. It developed out of the Arts and Crafts movement as the merger of the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts, begun in 1904 by the Belgian Art Nouveau artist-architect Henry van de Velde (1863–1957), and the Weimar Academy of Fine Arts, which seceded from the Bauhaus a year later in 1920. As the first director of the Bauhaus, the German architect Walter Gropius (1883–1969), wrote in 1923, “[John] Ruskin and [William] Morris in England, van de Velde ▲ in Belgium, [Joseph Maria] Olbrich, [Peter] Behrens and others in Germany, and, finally, the German Werkbund discovered the basis of a reunion between creative arts and the industrial world.” But this “reunion” was the project of the Bauhaus much more than that of its Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau antecedents; indeed, the eventual embrace of “the industrial world” signaled the effective end of these prior movements.

This embrace began in 1922–3. The Dutch De Stijl leader • Theo van Doesburg had visited the school in 1921–2, and the Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky also came to Weimar in 1922 ■ for the “Constructivist-Dadaist Congress” (organized by van Doesburg). But the turn toward industrial design was only ♦ clinched by the hiring of the Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) as a teacher in 1923. In 1925, after a conservative change in the regional government of Weimar, the Bauhaus moved north to the industrial city of Dessau, where its involvement in industrial design deepened. In 1928 Gropius was replaced as director by the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer (1889–1954), a staunch Marxist under whom, ironically, the school achieved its only commercial success. Due to political problems, however, Meyer was replaced in 1930 by the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969), who in 1932, after another conservative change in the regional government, moved the Bauhaus to Berlin. A year later, shortly after Hitler came to power, the Nazis shut it down. That the closure was among the first of the Nazi suppressions is testament to the force of the Bauhaus idea, which did not end there. Indeed, this idea spread with the emigration of teachers and students alike (Gropius, for example, was chairman of the architecture department at Harvard University from 1938 to 1952). Postwar reincarnations were attempted in the United States under

▲ Moholy-Nagy, as well as in Europe, and the Bauhaus continues to have a posthumous life throughout the West, not only in many art and architecture schools, but also in countless copies of its furniture and fixtures, appliances and accessories, typefaces and layouts.

Fundaments of material and form

On its founding, Gropius defined the Bauhaus as a “comprehensive system” with “the theoretical activity of an art academy combined with the practical activity of an arts and craft school.” The Bauhaus idea was thus to unite the disciplines of fine and applied arts under that of building in a new *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “total work of the arts”—despite the fact that the school did not have a proper architecture department until 1927. Its initial curriculum consisted of two basic parts [1]. The first was instruction in craft workshops: sculpture, carpentry, metal, pottery, stained glass, mural painting, and weaving—the last headed by a rare female instructor, the gifted Gunta Stölzl (1897–1983). The second was instruction in artistic



1 • Curriculum of the Weimar Bauhaus, 1923

“form problems”: study of nature and materials; teaching in materials, tools, construction, and representation; and theory of space, color, and composition. “Workshop masters”—craftsmen—led the first instruction, while “form masters”—artists—led the second, although several of the latter also participated in the workshops. Despite attempts at equality, the workshop masters have remained obscure, while the form masters include such renowned twentieth-▲ century artists as Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee.

In 1919 Gropius could afford only three appointments: the mystical Swiss painter Johannes Itten (1888–1967), who developed the first preliminary course required of all students; the German-American painter Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956), who developed a Cubist style with angular, quasi-Gothic lines [2]; and the German sculptor Gerhard Marcks (1889–1981), who became master of pottery. The next wave of recruits brought the best-known Bauhausians. Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943), who arrived in late 1920, became master of sculpture and, after 1923, master of theater as well; he also did murals (several within the Bauhaus),

for which his abstracted marionette figures in shallow geometric relief were well suited. Klee came in late 1920, too, followed by Kandinsky in early 1922. Although the Expressionist beginnings ▲ of the Bauhaus conflicted with its Constructivist leanings after the arrival of Moholy-Nagy, most of its artists were modernist in the sense that they all sought to reveal the fundamentals of materials, forms, and processes. It was this inquiry that drove the core curriculum of the Bauhaus—and all the later institutions that it inspired. This is true of the craft workshops as well: “We did not find our [weaving] workshop on a sentimental romanticism nor in protests against machine weaving,” Stölzl remarked in retrospect. “Rather, we wanted to develop the greatest variety of fabrics by the simplest means, and thus to make it possible for the students to realize their own ideas.”

The variety of this inquiry can be evoked through the courses offered by its most celebrated figures. Klee and Kandinsky taught a design course in tandem. Both had metaphysical tendencies, but they could also be analytical. For Klee, theory had to emerge from practice; “intuition joined to research” was the credo of his teaching as well as his art. He encouraged students to develop artistic techniques analogous to natural processes—to find “the becoming of forms,” “the antecedents of the visible.” Like Kandinsky, he began with the basics of point and line, which he saw as either active, passive, or neutral. Even as he valued affective variety in line (his famous definition of a drawing is “a line going for a walk”), he prized compositional harmony above all. So did Kandinsky, and in this regard both men took music as the paragon of abstract art (Klee was also a gifted violinist).

• Like Klee, Kandinsky developed a psychology of pictorial elements, but his pedagogy was more dogmatic, in part because he was well established as artist and professor alike (he had set up the program for the Moscow Institute of Art and Culture—Inkhuk—in 1920). His teaching focused on the analytical aspects of drawing and the emotive effects of color. In the first course, Kandinsky required students to abstract from a given object: first to reduce a still life to a simple form, then to render this form in a drawing, and finally to mark the tensions in this drawing as the basis for an abstract composition. In the second course, Kandinsky taught a theory of color structured on such opposites as yellow and blue (he saw yellow as warm and expansive, blue as cold and recessive), with the idea that a visual language could be developed that was more immediate than any verbal communication. He posited a similar psychology of line (for instance, verticals as warm, horizontals as cold) and combined these notions of color and line in a general theory of composition. A questionnaire circulated by Kandinsky suggests its flavor: he asked fellow Bauhausians to fill in a blank triangle, square, and circle with the colors that each form elicited; his own (correct) answer was yellow, red, and blue respectively. For all its claim to system, then, his theory remained subjective, not to say arbitrary, as did the painting that evolved from it. Indeed, what both system and painting bespeak, more than an “inner necessity” of spirit or a universal law of composition, as he claimed,



2 • Lyonel Feininger, *Cathedral of the Future*, 1919
Woodcut for the 1919 Program of the Bauhaus, dimensions unknown

▲ 1908, 1913, 1922, 1925c

● 1925c

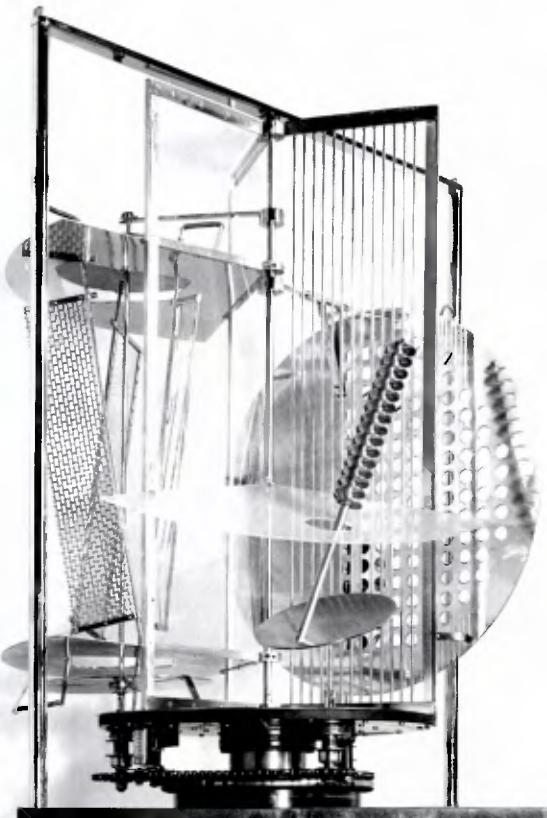
▲ 1928b, 1929 ● 1908, 1913 ■ 1921b

is an anxiety about the arbitrariness of abstraction, and an attempt to reground it in apodictic meaning.

From craft to industry

The real battle of the Bauhaus occurred not in these design classes but in the *Vorkurs*, a six-month probationary course required of all new students. Its first instructor was Itten, who, influenced by Kandinsky before his arrival, also investigated the psychological effects of line and color, which Itten understood in almost mystical terms. Even as his students investigated natural materials and drew diagrams of Old Master paintings, they were asked to capture the spirit of these things. When Moholy-Nagy replaced Itten as head of the *Vorkurs* in 1923, everything seemed to change—except perhaps the ethical basis of the instruction. Where Itten had dressed like a monk and abhorred machines, Moholy-Nagy looked like an engineer and declared the machine “the spirit of this century.” Out went the meditative exercises with natural materials and Old Masters; in came a Constructivist analysis of new media and industrial techniques. Self-taught, Moholy-Nagy was protean ▲ in his production. He made collages and photomontages, photographs and photograms (cameraless photographs in which various objects are placed on coated paper and exposed to light), metal constructions and “light-space modulators” [3] (kinetic constructions with lights), and so on. Whereas Itten had diagrammed masterpieces, legend has it that Moholy-Nagy once ordered geometric paintings from a sign factory—he literally phoned the order in. Yet in all these experiments Moholy-Nagy was fiercely analytical and logical, committed to understanding “the new culture of light.” If the students had tired of the cultish behavior of Itten by the time of his resignation in October 1922, they were shocked by the rationalist rigor of Moholy-Nagy. But when he resigned in 1928, this rigor had become synonymous with the Bauhaus idea, and it was carried on by Josef Albers, his collaborator in the *Vorkurs* and fellow promoter • of Bauhaus principles in the United States after World War II.

All histories of the Bauhaus remark on its pedagogical shift from preindustrial craft to industrial design. The first stance was manifested in the 1919 program written by Gropius to announce the school (“Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all return to the crafts!”); while the second is dated to 1923, when Gropius delivered a new position paper, “Art and Technology: A New Unity,” at the first Bauhaus exhibition, which was intended to demonstrate the new approach. Specific studies only nuance the shift as a progression from an early medievalist notion of craft to a later industrialist idea of craft. The first was advanced immediately after World War I in order to escape the “dilettantism” of academic art, to reunite artistic disciplines and artisanal practices under the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of building, and so to reconnect not only artists to craftsmen but both of these groups to workers and the *Völk* (the people) as well. The second was advanced in the mid-twenties as a necessary preparation for the new artist-as-designer now that industrial production had recovered somewhat after the war.



3 • László Moholy-Nagy, *Light-Space Modulator*, 1930

Kinetic sculpture of steel, plastic, wood, and other materials with electric motor, 151 x 70 x 70 (59½ x 27½ x 27½)

1920-1929



4 • Joost Schmidt, poster for the Bauhaus Exhibition, held in Weimar, July–September 1923

Evidence of this transformation is extensive. The original seal of the Bauhaus was an Expressionist stick figure with craft emblems under a wood frame designed by Karl Peter Röhl (1890–1969); in 1921 it was replaced by a confident Constructivist profile with Bauhaus lettering designed by Schlemmer. In 1919 the Bauhaus proclamation was illustrated with a Gothic-Cubist woodcut of “the cathedral of the future” by Feininger [2]; in 1923 the Bauhaus exhibition was announced by a rationalist lithograph poster by Joost Schmidt (1893–1948) that extended the Constructivist visage of Schlemmer into a figure that is at once human, machine, and architectural plan [4]. Until this time the emblematic building of the Bauhaus was an Arts and Crafts loghouse built in Berlin by Gropius and Adolf Meyer (1881–1929) for the timber merchant Adolf Sommerfeld; in 1923, for the Bauhaus exhibition, Georg Muche (1895–1987), who had arrived at the Bauhaus as much a mystic as Itten, modeled a steel-and-concrete “machine for living in.” But the real mark of the pedagogical shift was the replacement of the mystical Itten and his core course based on meditative exercise with the technophilic Moholy-Nagy and his course based on structural analysis. The transformation was made institutional in 1925, when the Bauhaus moved to a modernist plant designed by Gropius in Dessau [5], and was renamed an “institute of design” replete with a new program, and established a limited company for trade and patents.

The transformation, then, is not in dispute; the question is how to understand it. Neither an overnight coup nor an orderly transition, the shift from “craft” to “industry” was driven by contradictory forces that preexisted the Bauhaus. (These forces ▲ were also active, for example, in the Deutscher Werkbund, an association of artists and industrialists founded by the architect Hermann Muthesius in 1907, in which Henry van de Velde argued for a craft basis for design, while Muthesius insisted on industrial prototypes.) Thus, more than a personal opposition, Itten and Moholy-Nagy registered a historical contradiction, as did the discrepancy between the early craft advocacy of Gropius and the technological commitment of his architecture, both early

and late (as in his great Fagus shoe factory of 1911). In principle, the Bauhaus was always socialist, but its socialism changed as this socioeconomic contradiction developed. In its first moment, even as the Bauhaus looked to past models like medieval guilds, it also proclaimed a future utopia of artist-craftsmen united under building. In its second moment, however, this futuristic alliance became one of fellow producers in industrial design. In a sense, its historical contradiction is captured in the very term “Bauhaus”: even as it invokes modernist design for us today—rationalist architecture, tubular furniture, sans-serif typography, and so on—the name actually derives from the medieval *Bauhütte*, or lodge for masons.

Crisis and closure

“Originally the Bauhaus was founded with visions of the cathedral of socialism, and the workshops were established in the manner of the cathedral building lodges,” Schlemmer wrote in November 1922. “Today we must think at best in terms of the house.... In the face of the economic plight, it is our task to become pioneers of simplicity.” As Schlemmer sensed at the time, the two basic positions of the Bauhaus responded to two different Germanys: an anarchic country of 1919 that, torn by a lost war, an abdicated kaiser, and a failed revolution, was desperate to restore cultural community; and a fragile republic of 1923 that, wracked by inflation, was equally desperate to modernize industrially. Far from dead in 1919, the Art and Crafts movement was revived as a salve to the labor divisions and class conflicts exposed by the war. Such artist-architect associations as the Novembergruppe (named in honor of the failed November 1918 revolution in Germany) and the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Workers’ Council for Art) kept a “romantic anticapitalism” in the foreground of debate when the Bauhaus was founded. “For all its evils,” Gropius, who belonged to both groups, wrote in 1919, “Bolshevism is probably the only way to create the preconditions for a new culture.” What happened by 1923 to make him ditch his craft romanticism, propose a “new unity” of art and technology, advocate industrial design, and seek capitalist partnership?

More tactician than opportunist, Gropius had to struggle to keep the Bauhaus open through crisis and controversy, both internal and external. Before 1923, as inflation crippled the German economy (the Bauhaus student/teacher Herbert Bayer [1900–85] designed a one-million-mark note for general circulation in 1923), a craft program made perfect sense. By late 1923, however, the currency was reformed, and in early 1924 the Dawes loan plan from the United States began; German industry slowly recovered and soon boomed with foreign investments and new technologies. It was in this brief period of relative prosperity, which continued until the Wall Street Crash in 1929, that the Bauhaus shifted toward industrial design. The paradoxical position of Germany in between East and West helped its reorientation: the cultural experiments of Russian



5 • Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus buildings, Dessau, c. 1925



6 • Marcel Breuer, Slat Chair, 1922
Pearwood



7 • Marianne Brandt and Hein Briedendiek, bedside lamp, 1928
Designed for Körting and Mathiesen

chairs of Marcel Breuer (1902–81) [6], the work of Marianne Brandt (1893–1983) is extraordinary in quality and variety; though best known for her tableware, her greatest successes were her lighting fixtures (with its wedge base and bell shade to focus light, her reading lamp [7] set the standard for decades to come, and she also innovated with other task lamps, as well as ceiling lights set in opaque globes and frosted glass). It is only to suggest that the new goal of industrial participation was no more realized than the old goal of craft rehabilitation. For both were responses to a historical problem that the Bauhaus alone could not solve: how to address the division of labor between artistic disciplines and artisanal practices on the one hand, and to adapt both of these to the capitalist modernization of Germany, which was intensive because it was tardy, on the other. The Nazis had a different solution, in which the polar forces that the Bauhaus attempted to moderate—the atavism toward a mythical Teutonic past and the acceleration toward a capitalist industrialist future—were forced together in a deadly compound. HF

▲ Constructivism inspired great interest (witness again the repeated presence of El Lissitzky in Germany), but so did the industrial techniques of American Fordism (the autobiography of Henry Ford was a bestseller in Germany in 1923). In effect, the Bauhaus adapted the ideological look of the former to moderate the economic logic of the latter—but then what could it do after a failed revolution in a state controlled by capitalists? In any case, upon its move to Dessau, “masters” became “instructors,” workshops centered on the experience of material became technical laboratories based on the principle of function, and training was soon divided into two types—work on building techniques and work on industrial prototypes. Practices like woodcarving, stained glass, and pottery were dropped, metal and carpentry shops were combined, and the print shop was given over to design (in which Bayer in particular excelled).

Nevertheless, actual interaction with industry was limited, though not as limited as in Russian Constructivism, which dealt with an industry starved of raw materials and suspended between rigid Communist and reformist capitalist policies. As of 1924 the Bauhaus had only twenty contracts with German firms, much of which was publicity work. This is not to deny the sheer brilliance of Bauhaus design or its great influence on subsequent production. Besides the famous fixtures of Moholy-Nagy and

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1924

André Breton publishes the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, establishing the terms of Surrealist aesthetics.

Developing as a young poet under the inauspicious conditions of World War I France, André Breton (1896–1966) was profoundly marked by two, mutually reinforcing phenomena. The first was his service as a medical orderly on a ward of shell-shock patients at the Val de Grâce Hospital in Paris; the second was his encounter with the sensibility of Dada in the person of Jacques Vaché, a permanent *révolté* and subscriber to the utter absurdity of life.

Breton's ardent acceptance of the ideas of psychoanalysis—the unconscious, the pleasure principle, the expressive power of the symptom and of dreams, castration anxiety, even the death drive—derived from his experience with profoundly disturbed trauma victims. And the very nature of their trauma—that something could happen for which there was no way to prepare ahead of time—fits, furthermore, into Vaché's absurdist views. The idea of life as a series of unpredictable and uncontrollable shocks was enacted by Breton and Vaché in a type of movie-going in which they entered and exited from screenings in rapid succession and without any regard for the program, thereby producing a random collage of visual and narrative experiences wholly out of their control. A few years later Breton would put this attitude of openness to whatever might happen—or *disponibilité*—to work poetically in *Les Champs magnétiques* (*Magnetic Fields*; 1920), which he wrote with Philippe Soupault as an exercise in stream-of-consciousness, and which he composed, in this sense, “automatically.”

When it was time for Breton to separate himself from the Dada activities that had been mounted in Paris by the Romanian poet ▲ Tristan Tzara after the ending of the war and the Cabaret Voltaire Dadaists had been able to move from Zurich to France, he used the avant-garde form of the manifesto to set out the terms of what he was announcing as a new movement. “SURREALISM, *n.*,” his definition ran, “Psychic automatism in its pure state ... Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.” And the two avenues the manifesto laid out for capturing the products of psychic automatism were (1) the kind of automatic writing *Magnetic Fields* had already explored and (2) the irrational narratives provided by dreams. Indeed, the new movement’s very first act was to set up a central office in which to collect such narratives (offered by its

young members) and to establish a magazine, *La Révolution surréaliste*, in which to publish them.

The interpretation of dreams

None of this was very promising, one might say, from the point of view of the visual arts, and indeed the magazine’s first editor, Pierre Naville (who left the movement in 1927 to become Leon Trotsky’s secretary), opened fire on the idea of any traffic with the fine arts or the refinements of style: “We have no taste,” he wrote in the magazine’s third issue (1925), “but distaste.... No one can still be in the dark about the fact that there isn’t any *surrealist painting*. Neither pencil marks deposited by aleatory gestures, nor the image retracing dream figures.... But there are *spectacles*.... The street, the kiosques, cars, streetlamps bursting against the sky.” And in accordance with his call for mass-cultural phenomena in place of “art,” Naville illustrated the magazine mainly with photographs, many of them anonymous.

But Breton, who was an aesthete through and through—it was ▲ he who had brokered the sale of Pablo Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* to the fashion designer Jacques Doucet; it was he who had purchased heavily from Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler’s wartime sequestered stock of Cubist paintings at government auctions in 1921 and 1922; it was he who was amassing an extraordinary collection of tribal art—struck back, taking the magazine away from Naville in late 1925. Thereupon he began publishing the serialized treatise “Surrealism and Painting,” in which he laid claim to a variety of older artists as Surrealists-without-knowing-it ● (Picasso and Giorgio de Chirico [1]), a group of Dada figures as ■ threshold Surrealists (Max Ernst and Man Ray [1870–1976]), and a group of younger artists as burgeoning Surrealists (André Masson ◆ [1896–1987] and Joan Miró [1893–1983]).

Insisting that psychic automatism could indeed issue from brush or pencil, Breton welcomed the uncontrolled production of Masson’s automatic drawings and dribbled sand paintings, Miró’s dripped and spattered “dream pictures,” Ernst’s trancelike rubbings (or *frottages*). The transfer of collectively written “poems” that would “automatically” generate surprising imagery (called *exquisite corpse* after the first result: “the exquisite corpse drinks the

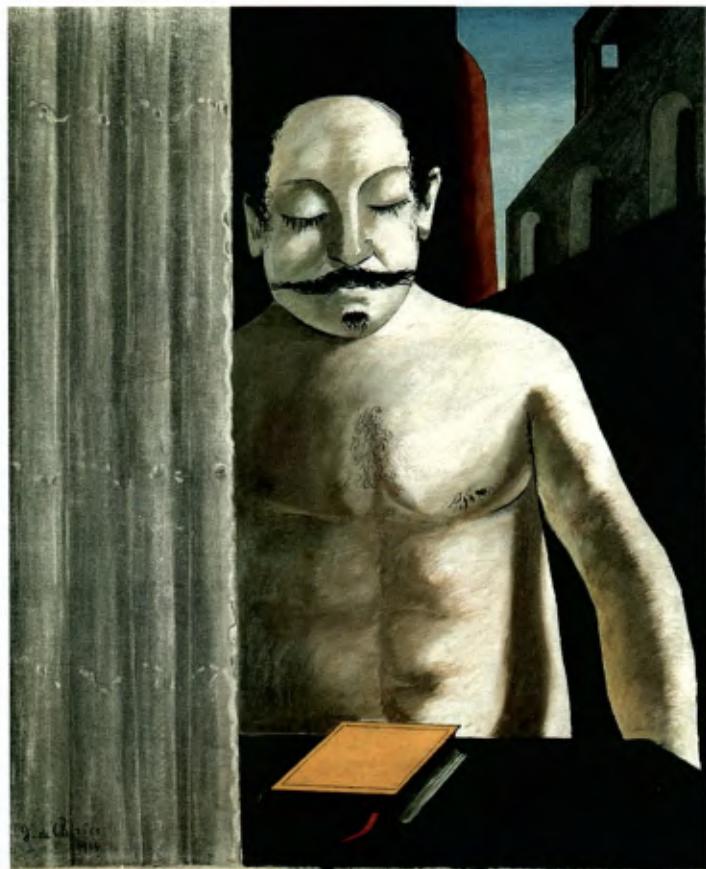
new wine") to games of collective drawing seemed to him an obvious move. But at the same time Breton also insisted on the importance of the idea of the symptom or trace or index as giving unimpeachable evidence of what lies behind reality by registering a disturbance on its surface. In practice this meant that he continued Naville's reliance on photography, not only in subsequent issues of the magazine but in the pages of his three autobiographical "novels," the first of which, *Nadja*, was published in 1928.

From the automatic text to the photograph seems a great leap indeed. The first is irrational and chaotic, while the second is mechanical and organized according to the very world the unconscious strives to disrupt. Yet in Breton's survey in "Surrealism and Painting" both of these poles are represented: automatism by ▲ the liquid spills and mists of Miró's open color paintings or the meanders of Masson's automatic drawings; the photographic by Man Ray's silver prints, often reproduced in *La Révolution surréaliste*, or the veristic dream paintings by Ernst, such as *Two Children Menaced by a Nightingale* [2].

It is this stylistic schizophrenia that has made Surrealism so elusive for many art historians. On the one hand, an iconographic bias has exploited the movement's formal heterogeneity to push for a thematic reading of its output, gathering works under various categories. Some of these reflect psychoanalytic concerns, such as castration anxiety (which produces a fear of female genitalia and imagery cycling around the idea of the *vagina dentata*) and



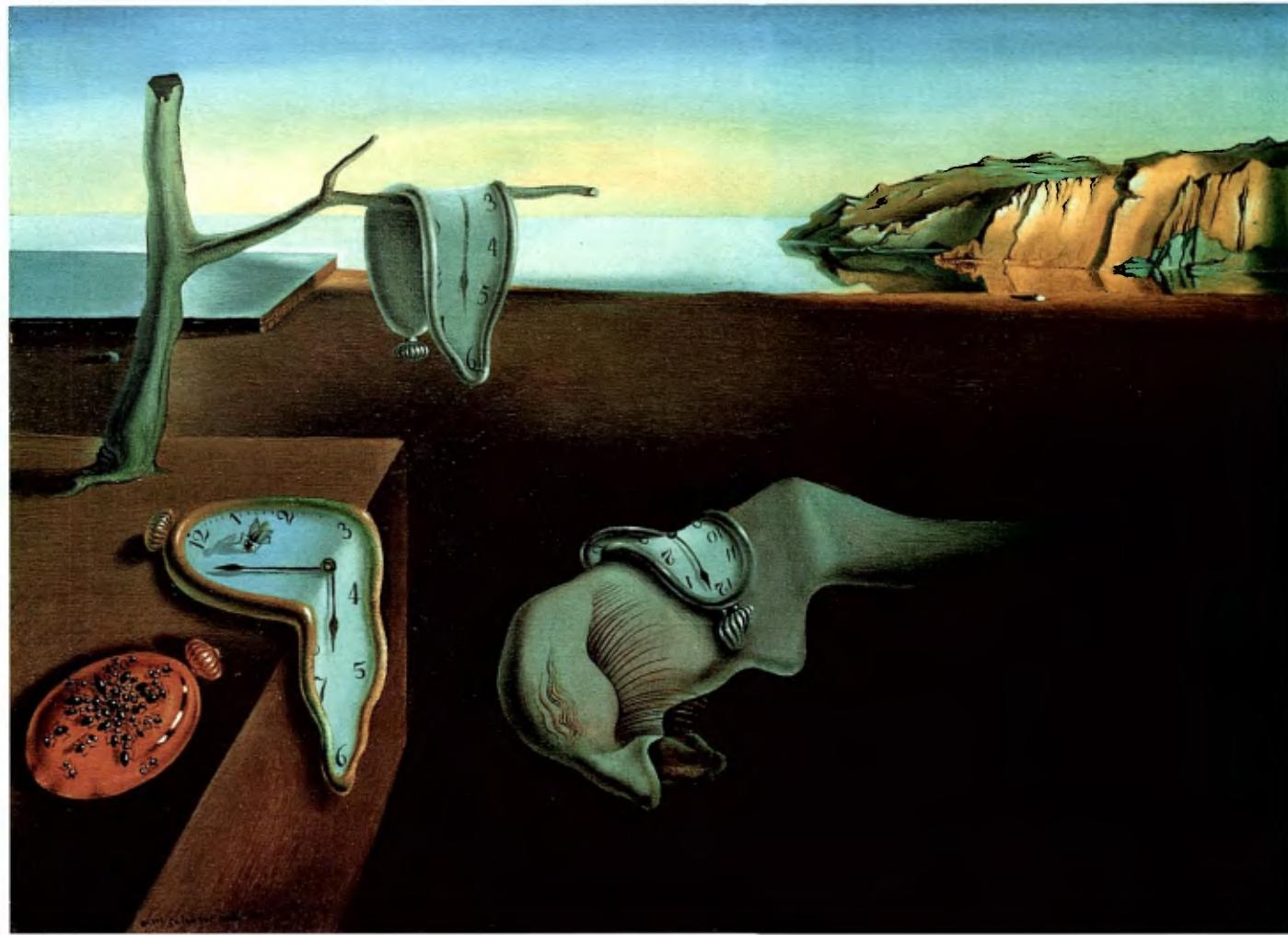
2 • Max Ernst, *Two Children Menaced by a Nightingale*, 1924
Oil on wood in original frame, 69.9 × 57.2 × 11.4 (27½ × 22½ × 4½)



1 • Giorgio de Chirico, *The Child's Brain*, 1914
Oil on canvas, 80 × 65 (31½ × 25½)

fetishism; others relate to the searing experience of World War I, such as the disorienting wasteland of the trenches or the grotesque physiognomies of the wounded or a desire to regress toward a primitive state of humanity. On the other hand, a certain type of modernism wants to claim those parts of Surrealism's visual production that seem acceptably abstract—Miró and the half of Ernst that confines itself to *frottage*—while disengaging itself of everything that seems retrograde and antimodernist because too suavely realistic—other parts of Ernst, late (and repetitious) ▲ de Chirico and René Magritte, and, after 1930, Salvador Dalí's photographically rendered dream pictures [3].

That Miró lends himself to this modernist tendency is easy enough to see. Having begun in the late teens in Barcelona as a Fauve-derived painter, and having subsequently absorbed the lessons of Cubism, he arrived in Paris in the early twenties and by 1923 was assimilated to the circle of poets and artists around Breton. The "dream paintings" he was making by 1925 were erotic recordings of Matisse's work from around 1911, in that fields of intense color were allowed to spread uninterruptedly over the surface, so disembodied was the drawing within them. If in Matisse's case drawing had been carried out by means of negative lines or "reserves" (as in *The Red Studio* [1911]), in Miró's it was now performed as a kind of calligraphy that converted all bodies to the transparency and weightlessness of the written sign. These waves of blue, in which space is devoid of limits and objects float like wisps of smoke, and in which bodies turn into question marks



3 • Salvador Dalí, *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931

Oil on canvas, 24.1 x 33 (9½ x 13)

or signs for infinity—only the little red bar at the nexus of the figure eight indicating that the content of this graphic mark is the joining of two cells in erotic contact [4]—fit nicely with a modernist narrative of formal “progress.”

But if the iconographic treatment of Surrealism seems insufficient, remaining blind as it does to something like the formal brilliance of Miró’s art, the modernist account seems equally impoverished. It can neither produce a reading that would relate ▲ Miró to his colleagues in the movement—from Masson to Dalí to Surrealist photographers like Raoul Ubac (1910–85) and Hans Bellmer (1902–75)—nor can it address the structural issue of whether, on the level of the signifier (the form of expression), there is anything coherent in all the rich diversity of Surrealist activity.

The third alternative is to use the actual categories that Breton developed to theorize Surrealism and to mine them for their *structure*, thereby generating on the one hand a set of formal principles (the technique of *doubling* would be one of them) that can be permuted through a whole range of visual styles and, on the other, an understanding of the way such categories recode psychoanalytic or sociohistorical problems. As just one example we could take “objective chance,” a variant on “psychic automatism” and a

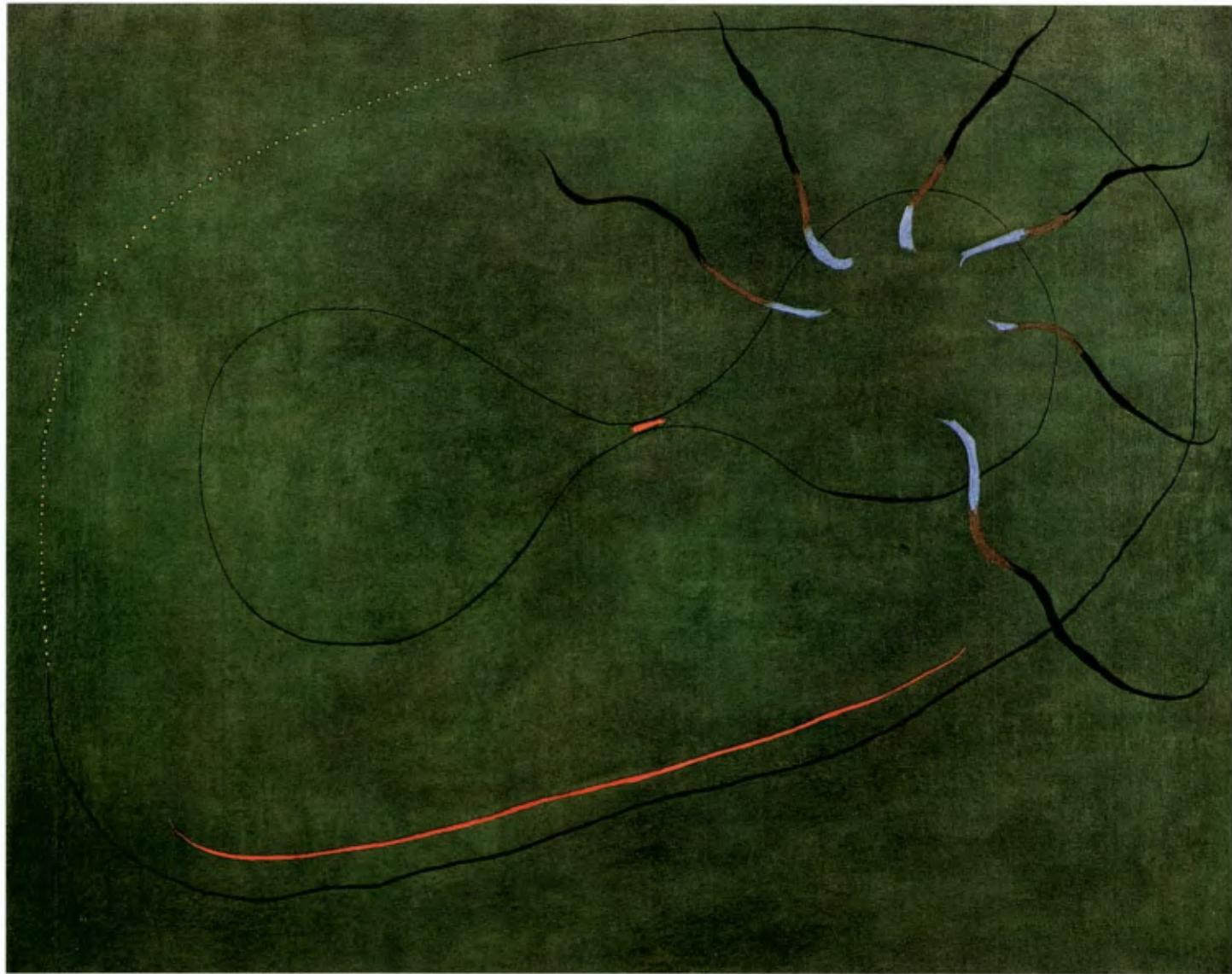
vehicle of the end result that Breton aspired to as a Surrealist, namely, “the marvelous.”

Breton describes objective chance as the crossing-point of two causal chains, the first subjective, interior to the human psyche, and the second objective, a function of real world events. In this conjunction, so seemingly unprepared for, it is discovered that on each side there was a kind of determinism at work. On the side of the real, the subject seems to have been expected, since what the world proffers at this moment is a “sign” specifically addressed to him or her. While on the side of the subject, there is an unconscious desire driving him or her unwittingly toward this sign, even constituting it as such, and allowing the sign to be deciphered after the fact.

The semiosis of Surrealism

While *Nadja* is constructed as a tissue of objective chance, the clearest illustration of how it works is presented at the beginning of another autobiographical novel, *L’Amour fou* (Mad Love; 1937). There Breton tells of going to the Marché aux Puces flea market in Paris and bringing home a wooden spoon with a little carved shoe projecting from the underside of its handle [5]. Not even liking this

▲ 1930b, 1931b, 1942a

4 • Joan Miró, *The Kiss*, 1924

Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 (28 3/4 x 36 1/4)

object, he nonetheless sets it on his desk whereupon it reminds ▲ him of another object he had fruitlessly asked Alberto Giacometti to sculpt for him some time earlier. This object, an ashtray in the shape of a glass slipper, had been meant to exorcise the nonsense phrase that had been running through Breton's head like a persistent tune: "cendrier-Cendrillon," or "Cinderella ashtray." Now suddenly, he says, he begins to see the newly purchased spoon as a series of nested slippers, each the representational double of the preceding one (the bowl of the spoon as the front of the slipper, the handle as the middle section, and the shoe beneath as the heel; then the shoe itself as the front, the middle section, and the heel; and then—imaginatively—its heel as containing another such slipper; and so on). This structure in which an object is mirrored by another, the double functioning as the representation of the first, Breton understands semiotically—he sees it as constituting a sign.

In this, Breton is completely orthodox, since signs are always pictured as ghostly doubles of the things they represent. More



5 • Man Ray, André Breton's slipper-spoon, 1934

Reproduced in Breton's *L'Amour fou* (1937)



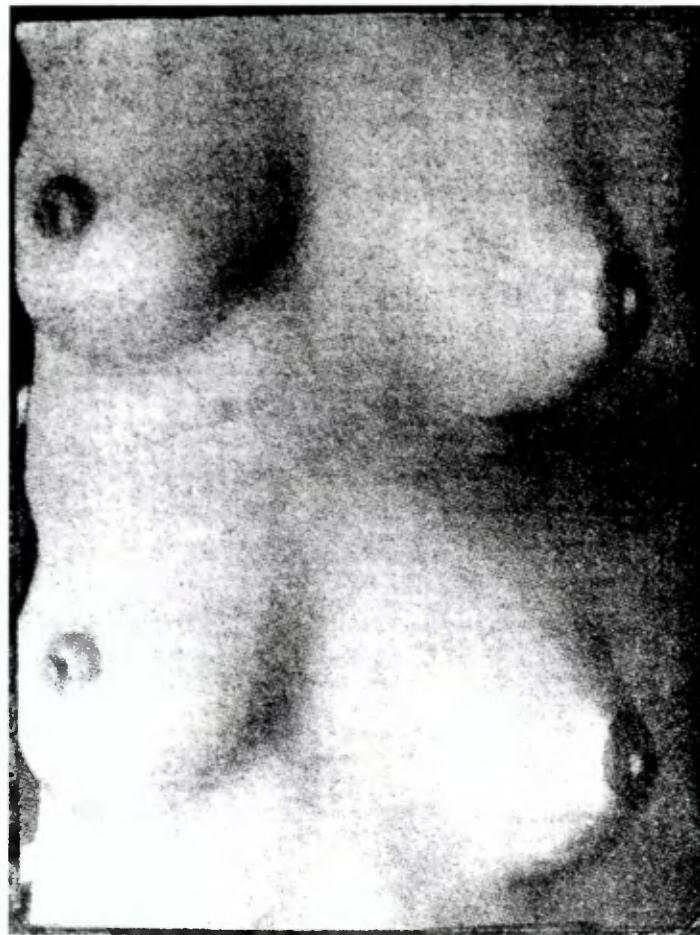
Surrealist journals

La Révolution surréaliste, the journal that formed the backbone of the Surrealist movement, lasted ten years, from 1924 until, after issue no. 12, in 1929 it yielded to *Le Surrealisme au service de la révolution*, which in turn was outshone by the more lavish and aesthetically more ambitious *Minotaure*. The initial journal was riven by an internal debate between André Breton and the journal's first editor, Pierre Naville. Naville proudly modeled the cover of *LRS* on the nineteenth-century magazine of popular science *La Nature*, since the "positivist nature" of the latter stood for the status of the documentary material the Surrealist journal would publish—accounts of dreams, and answers to questionnaires around such problems as "Is suicide a solution?" In addition, Naville called the offices of the review the Surrealist "*centrale*," imitating the headquarters of Communist Party cells. A collage of three photographs of the members of the movement gathered in the *centrale* ornamented the first issue of *LRS* (December 1924). The place of photography was secured both inside the journal's covers and on its outside, since Naville was interested in anonymous, popular imagery and was programmatically hostile to art. But when Breton took over the editorship of the journal he began to publish his four-part text "Surrealism and Painting," in which the genesis of Surrealist visual production (in the work of Picasso) is shown to have yielded such contemporary practitioners as Miró, Arp, Ernst, and Masson.

The documentary focus of the journal was not abandoned altogether, however. Breton celebrated the "50th Anniversary of the Discovery of Hysteria" with the publication of photographs taken of Charcot's patients in the Salpêtrière Asylum. The threshold between *LRS* and its successor *LSASDLR* was constructed by Breton's second manifesto of Surrealism, in which he exiled many of the original members of the movement, particularly those who had left the *centrale* to join with Georges Bataille and his radical journal *Documents*. Announcing on its cover that the areas of its concern would be ethnography, archaeology, and popular culture in addition to fine arts, *Documents* celebrated Bataille's own version of Naville's "distaste," in his exploration of the *informe* or formlessness.

importantly this condition of doubling is itself at the very beginning of language, as when a baby, repeating a sound—"ma-ma" or "pa-pa" or "ca-ca"—suddenly understands that the second sound, in redoubling the first, both reaches back to mark the initial one as a signifier (which is to say, not just a random sound but a meaningful utterance) and sets it up as a carrier of intentional meaning.

The slipper-spoon is, then, the world convulsed into a sign. But crucially this sign was not only addressed to Breton; it was willed by him through the power of his own unconscious desire. For he associated this sign-material with his unconscious thoughts, which, unknown to him, were driving him to assume the role of a prince setting out to seek his mate. What immediately follows is the story of Breton's encounter with the subject of this "mad love," an encounter all of the details of which he discovers, to his amazement, were "predicted" by an automatic poem he had written a decade earlier and which he is now unconsciously repeating in the present. Thus if the world's "sign" is structured through the condition of the double, the unconscious operates on the same principle. Freud had described this as the compulsion to repeat; in the sixties, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan would recode this semiotically by saying that the unconscious is structured like a language. Redoubling, then, is the formal condition of the unconscious drives.



6 • Man Ray, *Untitled*, 1924

Published in *La Révolution surréaliste*



7 • Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée (Doll)*, 1938

That photography is a function of doubling—not only does it “mirror” its object but, technically, its prints exist as multiples—made it a perfect vehicle for Surrealism, which exploited this aspect in its use of double exposures, sandwich printing, juxtapositions of negative and positive prints of the same image, and montaged doubles to produce this sense of the world redoubled as sign. The first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* carried several photographs by Man Ray in which doubling was at work [6].

But doubling, as was pointed out, has a certain psychoanalytic content, one aspect of which Freud discusses in his essay “The Uncanny” (1919). Ghosts, the very stuff of uncanniness, are doubles of the living; and it is when live bodies are redoubled by lifeless ones—as in the case of automata or robots, or sometimes ▲ with dolls, or with people in states of seizure—that they take on the uncanniness of ghosts. That doubles should produce this condition is due, Freud explains, to the return of early states of dread. One of these derives from infantile feelings of omnipotence, in which the child believes itself able to project its control into the surrounding world only to find, however, these doubles of itself turning round to threaten and attack it. Another is castration anxiety, in which, similarly, the threat takes the form of one’s phallic double. More generally, Freud says, anything that reminds us of our inner compulsion to repeat will strike us as uncanny.

That Hans Bellmer would build his early artistic practice entirely around a specially constructed doll, which he would arrange in various situations and then photograph, engages with this operation of the uncanny. Not only is the doll itself connected to this experience but Bellmer’s treatment both exploits the sense of the way the doll’s appearance to the viewer is dependent on either the operations of dream or on those of objective chance, and, by means of photomechanical doubling, projects the doll as the emblem of

castration anxiety: tumescent female redoubled as male organ [7]. Uncanny doubling, although unrelated to the figure of the doll, ▲ was also exploited by the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte. Interestingly, Freud’s description of the experience of the uncanny maps directly onto Breton’s recipe for objective chance. “Involuntary repetition,” Freud wrote, “surrounds with an uncanny atmosphere what would otherwise be innocent enough, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and unescapable where otherwise we should have spoken of ‘chance’ only.” And in relation to objective chance in *Nadja*, where Breton’s attraction to Nadja herself is partly due to her being able to predict when these chance occurrences would take place, Freud recalls the tendency of his neurotic patients to have “presentiments” that “usually come true,” a phenomenon he links to the recurrence of primitive omnipotence of thoughts. To the common example of objective chance occurring in most people’s lives through “uncanny” repetitions of the same number (our birthday, our street address, and, say, our new friend’s telephone number), Freud responds: “Unless a man is utterly hardened and proof against the lure of superstition he will be tempted to ascribe a secret meaning to this obstinate recurrence of a number, taking it, perhaps, as an indication of the span of life allotted to him.”

Objective chance indeed provides a common ground between Surrealist photographic practice and Miró’s “dream paintings,” since, like the former, the latter are focused on the waves of color yielding up a sign of the dreamer’s desire. Miró himself acknowledged as much in an extraordinary painting of this period in which, on a white ground, he deposited a splotch of intense cerulean blue. Over it, he wrote “this is the color of my dreams”; but in the upper left corner of the work, in much larger letters, he inscribed “Photo.” Somewhere on the painting’s material surface the chain of the real and the chain of the unconscious will meet. RK

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While the Art Deco exhibition in Paris makes official the birth of modern kitsch, Le Corbusier's machine aesthetics becomes the bad dream of modernism and Aleksandr Rodchenko's Workers' Club advocates a new relationship between men and objects.

As for this famous *Exposition*, it's probably not worth seeing it. They built such pavilions! Even from afar they are ugly and from close it's an horror." In the letters he wrote from Paris to his wife (the artist Varvara Stepanova), the Russian Constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko did not mince his words about the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs of 1925—from which the label Art Deco derives. Siding with French workers who commented that the glitzy display of luxury goods was nothing short of immoral in such times of financial duress, the major exception for his utter contempt was Konstantin Melnikhov's Soviet Pavilion to which he had contributed the white, black, gray, and red color scheme: "Our pavilion will be the most beautiful for its newness," he beamed. Even if padded with national pride, Rodchenko's assessment of the fair was not unique. Calling the Exposition a "total failure," from both the social and the aesthetic point of view, the French critic Waldemar George singled out only five buildings that could "be properly called modern" at the Exposition: besides Melnikhov's pavilion, he named Gustave Perret's Théâtre, Robert Mallet-Stevens's Hall d'Entrée pour une Ambassade and Pavillon du Tourisme, and Le Corbusier's landmark manifesto, the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, named after the journal that the Swiss architect had been editing since 1920.

Department-store modernism

The project of the Exposition had been discussed since 1907 in French political circles—as the success of several international fairs, notably in Turin in 1902 and Milan in 1906, was quickly erasing the memory of the grand 1900 celebration in Paris. But it was the formidable participation of the Deutscher Werkbund at the 1910 Salon d'Automne in Paris, highlighting the thriving collaboration between designers and industry in Germany, that provided the definitive sting. French decorative art was in decline, a 1911 official report of the Société des Artistes Décorateurs asserted, its downfall clearly due to lack of imagination and servile dependence upon a glorious past, and it was soon to be smothered by foreign competition. An international contest, the report went on to say, would provide an incentive for the much needed reform of production, and it would force designers and industrialists alike to think about,

rather than deliberately dodge, the new conditions brought about by the fast-developing machine age; the traditional association between decorative arts and luxury would be dissipated; a veritable "democratization of art" would follow, and art would at last regain its "true social function," which it had lost since the Middle Ages. Planned for 1915, the fair was postponed several times (first because of the war, then because of the financial and political crises that resulted from it), and ended up opening a decade later. In the meantime, the control of the enterprise had passed from the professional designers' organizations to leaders of commerce, with the four major Parisian department stores at the helm. Each had their own lavish pavilion, all built on the same model—a symmetrical temple one entered through a monumental door to discover an interior space divided into overstuffed living rooms around a central hall.

Designers were not the only constituents to be defeated by the massive onslaught of commercial interests. The choice of the fair's site—in the same area as its 1900 predecessor at the center of Paris—signaled the failure of social reformers (among them several architects such as Le Corbusier) to persuade the French government that the fair should be conceived as a testing ground for the burning issue of mass housing in postwar France. Rather than staging an architectural competition for a model housing complex in a vacant area, something that could be inhabited after the close of the exhibition—a strategy favored by the Deutscher Werkbund in the twenties—the exhibition's committee decided to allow the construction of temporary pavilions as showcases for foreign products or those of French provinces and national guilds, and also of any private company able to afford the considerable rent.

The immense touristic success of the fair was in direct proportion to its artistic mediocrity. For the most part, its architecture consisted of streamlined or slightly geometrized versions of past styles, and nearly all the luxury objects it contained could have been designed a quarter of a century earlier. Indeed, while the innovative furniture proposed by De Stijl or the Bauhaus had been utterly banned, the only foreign products to be welcome (and widely imitated) were those issued by the Wiener Werkstätte, founded in 1903. Amazingly, many of the best designers we now associate with Art Deco (such as Eileen Gray or Pierre Chareau) either did not participate or contributed very traditional interiors. "In fact," as Nancy Troy suggests, "the exposition

as a whole might well be described as an attempt to link contemporary life in France with a lost or rapidly vanishing past. The long vistas bordered by manicured lawns separating symmetrically positioned buildings created a sense of stability and order that France had not yet recovered almost seven years after the end of World War I, and the unabashed opulence of the majority of pavilions was in manifest contrast to the financial situation in which the exposition had been planned." One should add that even though the majority of visitors were from the middle class, which accounted for only a little less than a third of the French population at the time, few would have been able to afford much of its content. The fair was a fantasy land, where one dreamed about the way the affluent live before rushing to the department stores nearby in search of cheaper imitations of the saucer, teapot, or side table one had fancied. The commercial strategy was that of *haute couture*, not surprisingly given the spectacular participation of major couturiers such as Paul Poiret, whose three pavilions were floating extravaganzas on the Seine.

Le Corbusier's machine age

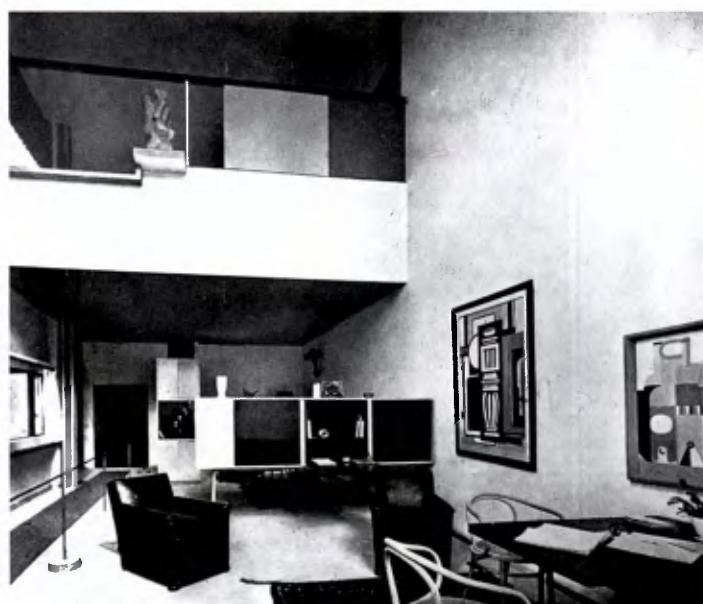
The most vociferous critic of the Exposition was Le Corbusier. After a long bureaucratic struggle he had been allowed to build his Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, at the periphery of the fair [1]. It consisted of two parts. The first, airy and drenched in light, was presented as a two-storey unit excerpted from the (nonbuilt) Immeubles-Villas, an apartment-cum-garden complex which he had conceived in 1922 and whose design he had been refining ever since; the second part was a windowless rotunda off the patio, devoted to the Swiss architect's ideas on urbanism, notably his scandalous plan for Paris, the Plan Voisin (named after the pavilion's main sponsor, the Voisin aeroplane and car manufacturer) in which he was proposing to raze the center of Paris, save a few important historical monuments, and replace its chaotic urban palimpsest with a vast green area interrupted by high-rise towers placed at regular intervals. The Plan Voisin was pure provocation, and it produced the expected reaction in the press, but while the dwelling section of the pavilion was less harshly criticized, it also had a very conspicuous polemical intent.

Since the beginning of World War I, Le Corbusier had lambasted architects and designers for their refusal to take into consideration the new conditions of production created by the machine, a denial made particularly conspicuous by the rapid evolution of mechanical processes in all industrialized nations as a result of the war effort. Even when new modes of construction were involved and new materials used, this had no bearing on the design's formal aspect, almost invariably conceived as a superficial mask hiding the architectonic structure, in whatever historical style was favored by the client. For Le Corbusier, Art Deco represented the triumph of such fraudulence. Not only was the claim of its designers (that their goal was an aestheticization of mass products) a lie, but even had it been true, its premises would still have been wrong. His Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau was intended above all to demonstrate that by the

sheer action of what he called "mechanical evolution" (a concept modeled after Darwin), industry was, by itself, able to engender a new kind of beauty: to tamper with it was a sure way to destroy it.

The pavilion was thus built using standard elements of the newest materials available, including the experimental wall paneling made of straw onto which concrete was projected. In the absence of any ornament, the modular regularity of the distribution of the vertical posts underscored the variations allowed by the structure (here a wall, there an opening) while, according to Le Corbusier, subliminally satisfying the visitor's "natural longing for order." But the most telling paean to industry was in the choice of furnishings that somewhat sparsely populated the pavilion: from the shelves and cabinets (industrial storage units labeled "*caisiers standards*") to the chairs (notably, the famous Thonet bentwood café chairs, whose design dates from the nineteenth century) to the glass vases (laboratory glass vessels), most were objects already available in the marketplace and directly referring to public spheres of daily life, either work (office, laboratory), or leisure (cafés). In truth, some of these objects were slightly modified for the occasion—the Thonet chairs among them—but not in any way that would soften Le Corbusier's fundamental attack against his Art Deco colleagues reigning at the fair and their ideal of the bourgeois private home as an overall ensemble for which everything had to be custom made.

Le Corbusier's fascination with industrial standardization dates back to 1917, when he read Frederick W. Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*. In this book, published in 1911 and translated into French a year later, Taylor singles out efficiency in labor organization as the best way of maximizing profits and generating growth, even if it meant treating workers like machines. Henry Ford would soon follow suit (in 1913) with his invention of the assembly line, masterfully presenting this new form of slavery as a promise of more leisure time for the masses. Until the late twenties, with an amazing political naivety, Le Corbusier firmly believed that if industrial



1 • Le Corbusier, interior of the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, 1925

In the background is Fernand Léger's *The Baluster* next to a still life by Le Corbusier.

production were to be reformed according to Taylor's and Ford's principles, all the ills of postwar Europe would vanish by themselves. He saw modern architecture, situated at a midpoint between art (functionless) and industry, as an essential component of such a reform. And even though in his diatribes against decorative arts he had always insisted on the necessity to safeguard the autonomy of art—an autonomy consciously staged in his pavilion by the juxtaposition of a few modern paintings and sculptures and of an eclectic variety of objects whose use-value was highlighted—his theory and practice of painting rested for a good part on a fetishized notion of standardization. Indeed, his first homage to Taylorism appeared in *Après le cubisme* (1918) the book he wrote with Amédée Ozenfant to launch their pictorial movement, which they called Purism.

The taming of Cubism

Contrary to the claims made by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (that is, Le Corbusier, who had not yet adopted his pseudonym) and Ozenfant in their tract, Purism is by no means a “post-Cubism.” Rather, it consists of a mere academicization of Cubism which, paradoxically, was based on a complete misunderstanding of Braque and Picasso’s enterprise. For the two Purist painters, Cubism was pure decoration—“if a cubist painting is beautiful,” they write, “it is in the same way a carpet is beautiful.” Although Cubism made ample use of geometrical forms, Ozenfant and Jeanneret claimed, it did so without recourse to any laws—its compositions were arbitrary, they were not controlled by any “standard.” Braque and Picasso’s extraordinary investigation of pictorial representation as indeed an arbitrary system of signs completely escaped the Purists, who saw in Cubism only an incompetent geometrization of reality that needed to be “corrected,” just as the strictures of the assembly line prevented any erratic behavior on the part of workers.

This was not new by any means. As early as October 1912 a group of artists had organized the Salon de la Section d’Or (Golden Section) with the explicit program of presenting to the public a version of Cubism that would be tamed by “universal” principles of “geometric harmony” going back to classical Greece and well established in the tradition of French painting, from Poussin to Ingres to Cézanne and Seurat. Simultaneously, one of the participants—Raymond Duchamp-Villon—was presenting at the Salon d’Automne his facade of the Maison Cubiste, a project which is perhaps the seed of the Art Deco phenomenon. Conceived by André Mare, one of the most established designers in the future 1925 fair, and replete with works of Duchamp-Villon’s co-exhibitors at the Section d’Or, such as his brothers Marcel Duchamp and Jacques Villon, but also Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, the authors of *Du Cubisme* (1912) (a book long held as the theoretical basis of Cubism despite Picasso’s and Braque’s scorn), the decoration of the Maison Cubiste’s three interior rooms is not particularly memorable. Its patent eclecticism was intended as the definitive blow against Art Nouveau design (deemed “international,” which meant “German” at the time), and

it was successful at that, but only by espousing the nationalist tenet of a Louis-Philippe revival (not quite a return to the *ancien régime*, since it had developed under a bourgeois monarchy, this style was heralded as the last true French style). Duchamp-Villon’s facade partook of this revivalist mode, and it revealed even more clearly that the modernism of the Maison Cubiste was only cosmetic: this decor was not much more of a pastiche of a nineteenth-century version of a seventeenth-century *hôtel particulier*’s facade, powdered with specks of angular faceting.

In the postwar context, the nationalistic current of this academic Cubism flourished under the aegis of what has been called the ▲ “return to order”: the “righting” of Cubism was part of the reconstruction ideology, together with a renewed interest in France’s *latinità* or a public policy favoring a surge in birthrate. Given his horrified response when discovering Picasso’s first Ingres pastiches in 1915, which arguably mark the beginning of the “return to order,” it might come as a surprise that Juan Gris would have so definitively joined its ranks. Yet even though Gris’s prewar collages are no less feats of spatial ambiguity and plastic wit than those of his Spanish friend and mentor, his artistic creed reveals a latent rationalism that could not have been further from Picasso’s attack against the tradition of mimetic representation: “Cézanne transforms a bottle into a cylinder,” he wrote, and “I begin with a cylinder in order to create a bottle.” In other words, geometry comes first: objects, to be included at all in the composition, have to fit an a priori grid.

Ozenfant’s and Jeanneret’s paintings follow the same logic (though their justification, unlike Gris’s, was an appeal to Taylorist organization)—and it is not by chance that Le Corbusier included one of Gris’s canvases in his Pavillon. Indeed, for all their paintings—inevitably still lifes [2], and most of them in a format determined by the golden section—Ozenfant and Jeanneret first established a grid of regulating lines (“*tracés régulateurs*”) establishing the placement of “object-types” (supposedly the lucky survivors of “mechanical evolution”), often depicted both in plan



2 • Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier), *Purist Still Life*, 1922
Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 (25 5/8 x 31 1/2 in)



3 • Fernand Léger, *Three Women (Le Grand Déjeuner)*, 1921

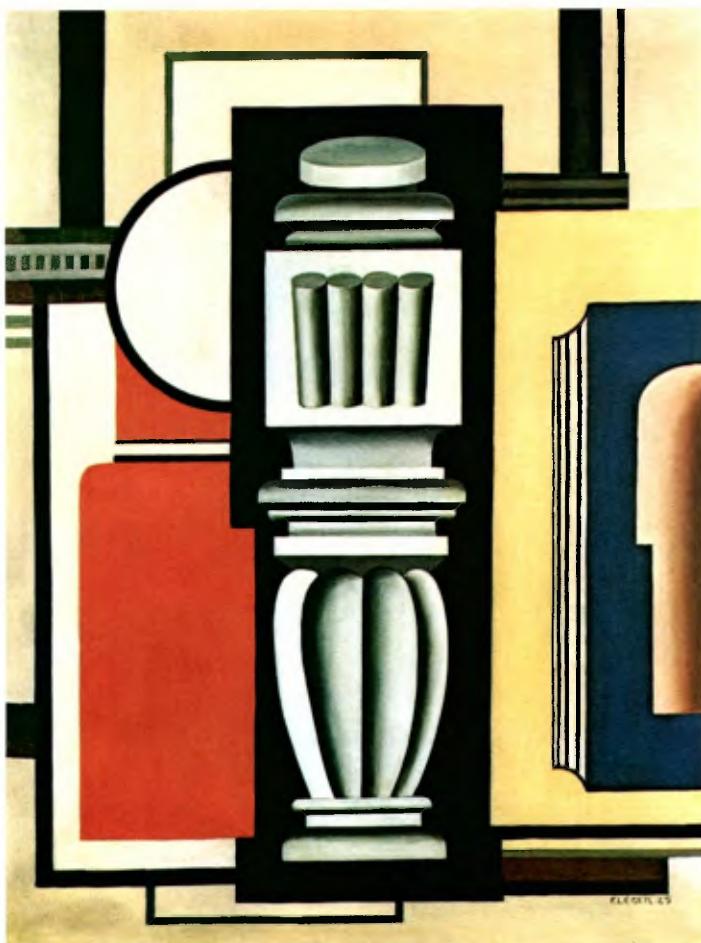
Oil on canvas, 183.5 × 251.5 (72 1/4 × 99)

and elevation and alluding directly to architectural forms (a carafe becoming a doric column, the neck of a bottle, a chimney). Volumes are reduced to simple prisms, with an occasional accentuation of the modeling all the more perceptible now that most objects are rendered by planes of color as flat as the background; orthogonals dominate; colors are never strident: the overall tone is one of tasteful, but somewhat vapid, restraint.

Another painter whose work was included in Le Corbusier's 1925 pavilion needs to be mentioned here, namely Fernand Léger—for although his work too was inflected by the "return to order" ideology, he was the only French artist who shared, and even exceeded, the architect's adulation for the machine. Although Léger had never emulated Picasso's art, he borrowed from Analytical Cubism one of its main strategies (using a single notational element for every object represented in a painting) in order to realize in 1913 his first ▲ mature works, a series of canvases entitled *Contrasts of Forms*. On the verge of abstraction, these paintings were conceived as accretions of tubular volumes of bright color whose metallic rotundity is signified by white highlights. When he was drafted to World War I's battlefield, Léger's mechanistic enthusiasm did not abate, almost inexplicably, given the horrors he witnessed and profusely sketched,

all due to the sheer force of modern armament. But he came back from the war with a blind desire to divest the machine of the destructive image it had in the eyes of his contemporaries. The tubular elements were gradually replaced by more recognizable segments of human anatomy [3]; the figures, almost all monochrome, schematically modeled, and striking poses that signify leisure, stood in more dramatic contrast to the colorful and dynamic background, most often cityscapes made of geometric shapes populated here and there by diagrammatic billboards.

The *Baluster* [4] is perhaps one of Léger's most legible canvases of the period, and, save for the brash color, stylistically the closest to the Purist aesthetic, which is undoubtedly why Le Corbusier chose it for his pavilion. As Carol Eiel notes, the central element can be read both as a baluster and a bottle; the red form that echoes it on the left, with its upended white circular opening, resembles the vents of factories or ocean liners illustrated in *L'Esprit Nouveau* and common in Léger's cityscapes of the period; the vertical edge of the book suggests a classical column; the "four verticals in the top half of the baluster, highlighted on a light ground, can be read as four smokestacks or grain silos, while the dashed horizontal form at the left edge of the canvas suggests the motions and movement of an assembly line as



4 • Fernand Léger, *The Baluster*, 1925
Oil on canvas, 129.5 × 97.2 (51 × 38 1/4)

Black Deco

The association of negritude with abandon animated the artistic life of the Left Bank, particularly in the nightclub district, Montparnasse, where jazz filled the air with delicious dissonances, and frenzied music became the support for drunken dancing until late into the night. Floorshows such as those by Josephine Baker, who danced half-nude, underscored this relationship, which nonetheless soon gave way to a very different experience of black form. This could be called "Black Deco," or the aestheticized use of tribal shapes and motifs within the decorative arts. For the costumes and sets of the ballet *La Création du Monde* (1923), Fernand Léger exploited the strong silhouettes and repeated patterns of primitive sculpture. The entire panoply of Art Deco furniture and accessories followed this lead as silver patterns were combined with the sheen of ebony woods and leopard skins were juxtaposed with crocodile hides. Where this luxury trade led, artists soon followed and the influence of Black Deco on sculptors such as Constantin Brancusi and Jacques Lipchitz could be seen, as well as on designers like Le Corbusier and Jean Prouvé. For all these figures, Black Deco was a powerful cocktail mixing "primitive" Africa with machine-age America.

well as film sprockets." This last allusion is particularly significant, ▲ coming soon after Léger had finished his film *Ballet Mécanique* [5], which was, if not the very first, at least one of the most self-conscious attacks ever launched against narrative cinema. With its absurd repetition of found footage (a woman climbs a flight of steps twenty-three times), its kaleidoscopic multiplication of eyes, balls, hats, and other circular shapes within the same frame, its pulsatile celebration of linear motion, its decomposition and recomposition of bodies and faces, its dance of triangles, circles, and machine parts, *Ballet Mécanique* is Léger's most remarkable foray into abstraction. By contrast, and even though it was taken off the wall at the request of the government, the mural painting that he exhibited in Mallet-Stevens's Hall d'Entrée pour une Ambassade seems subdued. • Inspired by De Stijl (in particular by van Doesburg's *Rhythm of a Russian Dance* of 1918), it belongs to a handful of works, all dating from 1924 to 1925, that Léger conceived as mural decoration—for him the only possible venue of pictorial abstraction.

Architecture or revolution / architecture as revolution

Had he been as distant from bourgeois culture as he thought he was, Léger might have reflected upon the very different proposal made by the Soviet entry at the Exposition, conceived as propaganda for the Soviet regime (which had just finally been recognized by the French government) and destined to prove that the Revolution was better equipped than the capitalist West to respond to the demands of postwar reconstruction. This entry consisted of two parts: Konstantin Melnikov's Soviet Pavilion [6], and Rodchenko's Workers' Club built within that monument of 1900 kitsch, the Grand Palais.

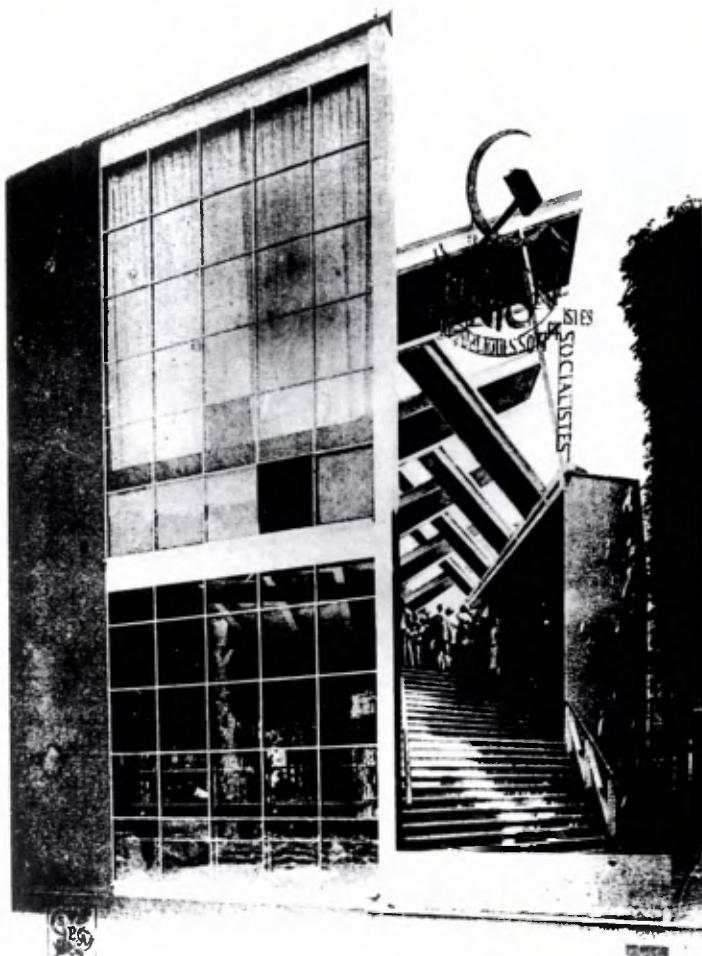
Melnikov's pavilion was by far the most daring building of the fair—Rodchenko was right on this point. In plan, it consisted of an oblong rectangle diagonally bisected by an exterior double staircase that functioned like a street one had walk through before entering any of the two enclosed triangular volumes on each of its sides. Triangles and ascending oblique lines were omnipresent



5 • Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, still from *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924

(even lending a new meaning to a traditional feature such as the slant roof). Melnikov had created in architectural forms a homage to the “red wedge” of the Revolution that was as dynamic as El Lissitzky’s famous 1918 poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*. The red, white, and gray colors of the exterior walls and interlocking (oblique) canopies above the staircase made a stark contrast with the transparency of the main glass facades; the deliberately unluxurious material (painted wood) and the elemental, almost ludic, mode of assembly, in record time, of all the parts, which were shipped from Moscow, was a clear jab at the massive pomp of most pavilions in the fair and their decorative skin of enameled tiles or marble.

Though less ebullient, Rodchenko’s interior was no less a critique of capitalist luxury and, above all, of capitalism’s veneration of the private sphere, for it was relentlessly marked as a collective space [7]. The workers’ club was a recent invention of the nascent Soviet regime. In exporting this concept—and in making sure it would not escape notice by commissioning one of the most active Constructivist artists for its design—the new Socialist Republic wanted to demonstrate that the Soviet Revolution, far from being barbarian, had engendered a new culture, and that, in its care, the workers had access to leisure, unlike those in capitalist countries. Faithful to the



6 • Konstantin Melnikov's Soviet Pavilion at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, 1925

▲ 1926, 1928a, 1928b ● 1921b



7 • Interior of Aleksandr Rodchenko's Workers' Club, built for the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs and installed in the Grand Palais, Paris, 1925

principles of his 1921 abstract sculptures, Rodchenko emphasized two aspects of his wood furniture (painted in the same colors as the Melnikov building): the transparency of their mode of construction (without upholstery, all the joints were revealed) and their transformability. “Emphatically mobile,” writes Leah Dickerman, “the Club’s objects were to be adjustable by the user, both for convenience and for different functional requirements. The reading table had leaves that could be moved from an inclined position, for supporting reading matter, to a flat one, creating an expanded work surface; cylinders holding photographs allowed for a rotating display of many images in a small space; and the gaming surface of the chess table spun to the vertical to allow the players access to the built-in seats.” The true star of this hymn to polyfunctionality was the collapsible orator rostrum/movie screen, with its lattice unfolding at will in all directions of space, and the care that Rodchenko devoted to its design reveals that he conceived of his club as a media space, in which workers would process information and act upon it.

The assembly-line disposition of the two rows of chairs around the Club’s table was no less informed by Taylor’s principles than was Le Corbusier’s raiding of the marketplace for “standard objects” with which to furnish his pavilion, but Rodchenko did not share the architect’s blind faith in the machine as a guarantee of mankind’s future well-being. At the same time as his Club showed (*contra Léger*) that the future of abstraction was not necessarily in decoration, it proposed a new relationship between men and objects, in which we would no longer be consumers but coplayers in the chess game of life. While Le Corbusier’s *Towards a New Architecture* ended with this alternative: “architecture or revolution,” Rodchenko, true to his Constructivist program, articulated the slogan “architecture *as* revolution” with every square inch of his Club. Both dreams, the subsequent history of the century tells us, ended up as nightmares. YAB

FURTHER READING

- Carol S. Eliel, “Purism in Paris, 1918–1925,” *L’Esprit Nouveau: Purism in Paris, 1918–1925* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001)
- Leah Dickerman, “The Propagandizing of Things,” *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998)
- Christina Kiaer, “Rodchenko in Paris,” *October*, no. 75, Winter 1996
- Mary McLeod, “Architecture or Revolution: Taylorsim, Technocracy, and Social Change,” *Art Journal*, vol. 42, no. 2, Summer 1983
- Nancy Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991)

Curator Gustav F. Hartlaub organizes the first exhibition of Neue Sachlichkeit painting at the Kunsthalle, Mannheim: a variation of the international tendencies of the *rappel à l'ordre*, this new “magic realism” signals the end of Expressionism and Dada practices in Germany.

The short life of the Weimar Republic (1919–33) qualifies more than any other period in the twentieth century for Antonio Gramsci's diagnosis that “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appears.” The first five years of the newly founded republic were marked by perpetual economic and political turmoil, by social disorganization and disillusion. Not until 1924 did a relative stabilization of the economy give an elementary (and illusionary) sense of solidity to the democratic culture of the Republic, only for it to be shattered again in 1929 with the world economic crisis, and to be decisively destroyed in 1933 with Germany's embrace of fascism and the rise of Hitler. Even during these “sober” years from 1924 to 1929, comprising the crucial period of Neue Sachlichkeit, most members of the cultural intelligentsia, if not the population at large, perceived themselves as being part of what literary historian Helmut Lethen has called an experimental existence “between two wars.”

The term “Neue Sachlichkeit,” somewhat inadequately translated as “New Objectivity” or “New Sobriety,” was coined by Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, the director of the Kunsthalle in Mannheim, when he announced a forthcoming exhibition of new figurative work by a group of German painters. Initially planned for 1923, the show eventually took place between June 14 and September 13, 1925, and included works by Max Beckmann (1884–1950), Otto Dix (1891–1969), George Grosz, Alexander Kanoldt (1881–1939), Carlo Mense (1886–1965), Kay H. Nebel (1888–1953), Georg Scholz (1890–1945), and Georg Schrimpf (1889–1938). In his announcement of the project, Hartlaub defined Neue Sachlichkeit somewhat lapidarily as work governed by the “loyalty to a positively tangible reality.” He was not alone in discerning this new tendency toward realism in German painting. In the same year as “Neue Sachlichkeit” opened, critic and art historian Franz Roh published *Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus* (Post-Expressionism: Magic Realism), thereby providing his own label—magic realism—to describe the emerging style. (The success of the Mannheim exhibition meant that Hartlaub's term prevailed.)

From its very inception, Hartlaub, Roh, and other critics such as Paul Westheim recognized that Neue Sachlichkeit was deeply divided: the rift was identified, as Hartlaub wrote, by the opposi-

tion between “the right wing of the neoclassicists like Picasso and the left wing of *veristic* painters like Beckmann, Grosz, Dix,” that is, by the opposition between *Ingrismus* (named for the early nineteenth-century French painter Ingres) and *Verismus* (realism). These critics also recognized the extent to which the German artists' return to figuration (and its ostentatious departure from

- Expressionism and Dada) was due, at least in part, to their recent encounters with French and Italian antimodernist precedents. As early as 1919 Westheim had stated in his *Das Kunstblatt*: “Characteristic of Carlo Carrà's work … as indeed of a whole group of young artists, is an idiosyncratic, uncompromising realism (*verismo*), seeking a meticulous hard line which suppresses every trace of the individual artist's manner. In Germany, as is known, Grosz and Davringhausen are following a similar path.” And in 1921 Westheim commented on the reverberations of Picasso's “Ingresque” style in Germany, addressing the topic again in September 1922 with a special issue of *Das Kunstblatt* that featured a questionnaire on the “New Realism.”

From *manichino* to *machino*

The time and place of the Germans' encounter with *pittura metafisica* are firmly established, being, as is so often the case in the twentieth century, primarily in the pages of a journal. In this instance, it was the Italian publication *Valori plastici*, edited since 1918 by the critic and collector Mario Broglio. The third issue of the journal in 1919 was devoted in its entirety to the work of

- Giorgio de Chirico, Carlo Carrà, and Giorgio Morandi. It was admired at once by Max Ernst, George Grosz, Georg Schrimpf, and Heinrich Maria Davringhausen (1894–1970) in the Munich gallery and bookshop of Hans Goltz, *Valori plastici*'s German distributor. This encounter led not only to Max Ernst's instant publication of a *metafisica* portfolio of lithographs entitled *Fiat Modes, Pereat Ars* (1919), but also to the first exhibitions of Davringhausen in 1919 and Grosz in 1920 at Goltz's gallery.

- ◆ The iconography of the metaphysical *manichino* (mannequin) would be dramatically recoded in the hands of the German Neue Sachlichkeit artists to become a *machino*. What had appeared in de Chirico as an allegory of painting's lost capacity to engender figu-

ration, reappeared now in Grosz's work as the "Republican Automaton," that peculiar hybrid between a tailor's dummy and the office robot in which the new identity of the "civil servant," the white-collar authoritarian personality, appeared to be best captured [1]. Walter Benjamin's critique of *neusachlich* literature in the essay "Left Wing Melancholia" describes such types thus:

These puppets heavy with sadness that will walk over corpses if necessary. With their rigid body armor, their slowly advancing movements, and the blindness of their actions, they embody the human fusion of insect and tank.

But even in its Neue Sachlichkeit adaptation, the *manichino/machino* morphology remains fluid, shifting easily from victor to victim. What is an authoritarian automaton in one image, becomes the industrially mechanized or armored body in the next. Or, after 1918, with six million soldiers returning from the war, in image after image we encounter the machinic body as the prosthetic body, the war cripple (as for example in the work of the Cologne Progressives group, like Heinrich Hoerle's *Cripple Portfolio* of 1920 or in Dix's *The War Cripples* [1920]).

The exclusion of photographers from Hartlaub's exhibition and from Roh's study (even though, four years later, Roh would publish the famous anthology of modernist photography *Foto-Auge*) indicates that the discoverers of a "new objectivity" wanted to see its truth-value established first of all with the traditional means of painting. Thus Hartlaub concluded his introduction to the exhibition by stating that:

What we are showing is that art is still there ... that it is alive, despite a cultural situation that seems hostile to the essence of art as other epochs have rarely been. Thus artists disillusioned, sobered, often resigned to the point of cynicism having nearly given up on themselves after a moment of unbounded, nearly apocalyptic hope—that artists in the midst of the catastrophe, have begun to ponder what is most immediate, certain, and durable: truth and craft.

That desperate desire for the objectivity of transhistorical truth could also be found in statements by other critics. Writing in *Der Cicerone* in 1923, Willi Wolfradt—once again opposing *Ingrismus* and *Verismus*—argued that both shared "the concept of clarity, the former in a more formal sense, and the latter in a more objective sense. In *Ingrismus* the definition of clarity is derived from antiquity, in *Verismus* it is derived from the machine. And while both might be incompatible worlds, in both worlds it is *objective truth that dominates*." This opposition between the truth of craft and antiquity, on the one hand, and the truth of the machine on the other, originated, however, in a set of much more fundamental conflicts. First of all in the social schism between an enthusiastic embrace of industrial modernization along the lines of the much vaunted "Americanism" and "Fordism" (the source of endless fashions



1 • George Grosz, *Pillars of Society*, 1926

Oil on canvas, 200 × 108 (78½ × 42½)

and cults in Weimar Germany) and a violent and pessimistic reaction against these processes of industrial mechanization and rationalization. This reaction was primarily to be found among the increasingly unemployed and proletarianized middle class, leading to the rise of antimodernist and eventually ethnic and racist ideologies of "returns" to phantasms of pure origins and uncontaminated authenticity. Invoking German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies's (1855–1936) famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), the new ideologues of the conservative right promised a return to preindustrial belief systems, mythical forms of social organization, and artisanal production, thereby laying the foundations for the fascism of 1933.

This conflict was exacerbated by the opposition between bourgeois concepts of high art and the proletarian needs for a progressive emancipatory mass culture. Not only was the sphere of a supposedly autonomous high culture increasingly precarious (and therefore all the more fetishized), but all the earlier forms of social relations and popular culture had been replaced by a proto-totalitarian mass culture and media apparatus. Unlike the ▲ Soviet avant-garde, however, which was simultaneously undergoing a very similar transformation from a radical experimental modernist aesthetic to a systematic exploration of what a new postrevolutionary avant-garde culture in a developing proletarian public sphere might mean, the artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit did not face a similarly homogeneous revolutionary society. First of all, the Weimar Republic, as novelist Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) famously stated, came without an instruction manual, indicating that the new democratic culture of the “belated nation” had to be acquired through trial and error. Second, unlike the Soviet Union, the Weimar Republic after 1919—despite its revolutionary aspirations—had been structured as a class society, albeit one in which previously oppressed social strata suddenly found themselves with more economic and political power than they might have ever imagined under the previous regime of Kaiser Wilhelm. Thus Weimar, politically organized around the principles of social democracy, became the democracy not only of a newly empowered oligarchic bourgeoisie, but also of an economically powerless but rabid *petite bourgeoisie* and a proletariat that was perpetually oscillating between revolutionary radicalization and fascist *embourgeoisement*. Ernst Bloch, in his 1935 book *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (Heritage of our Times), was the first to argue that Neue Sachlichkeit, rather than revealing a new face of the collective, actually camouflaged an evolved capitalism that had adopted socialist principles, such as a planned economy, collective housing, and an overall sense of equality, but without reneging the primacy of an economy of profit. These universally governing conditions of reification—according to Bloch—generated Neue Sachlichkeit’s seduction as much as the vacuity of its representations.

From fragments to figures

The peculiar fact that Neue Sachlichkeit had both former Expressionists (Beckmann and Dix) and former Dadaists (Grosz and Schad) among its key members deserves attention. After all, • Expressionism had been the moment in which the humanist and pacifist subject staged itself in a histrionics of finality, whereas the ■ Dada artists accelerated and celebrated the demise of bourgeois subjectivity in a grotesque travesty of cultural practices and pretenses. Thus, one might well ask what the motivations of these artists might have been to abandon either the Expressionist aspirations or the Dadaist derisions in favor of a peculiar hybrid of putative objectivity. These extreme ambiguities of transition are particularly evident in a number of key works around 1919–20, such as Beckmann’s *The Night* [2], Dix’s crucial paintings from the

same year such as *The War Cripples*, or Grosz’s slightly later *Pillars of Society* from 1926 [1].

The Night is not only a classic example of Expressionism turning *neuschlich*, but even more so of the liberal inability (or refusal) to conduct an analysis of the political situation. Instead, it invokes and essentializes—in an act of humanist deflection—the universal catastrophe of the “human condition.” While Beckmann’s work had clearly acknowledged the tragic experiences of the failed German revolution of 1919, with its brutal murders of Marxist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht among many others, this depiction of a cryptic scene of sado-masochistic mayhem positions the revolutionary worker (possibly a clandestine portrait of Lenin) on the same level of violent perpetration as the fascist *petit bourgeois*. Typically, Beckmann’s humanist lament of universal bestiality fails to reflect on the painting’s own heavily repressed but fully exposed indulgence in the sadistic scenes it pretends to reveal.

These ambiguities are keyed differently in Dix’s most important paintings from the same moment, such as *The War Cripples*, *The Card Players*, and *Prager Strasse* (1920), or in Grosz’s *Pillars of Society*. Here the subject is either depicted as the cripple, the physically annihilated victim of the imperialist war, or as the menacing impostor who inflicts the very conditions of physiological laceration and psychic trauma. Both the victor and the victim are mediated through similar iconographic, morphological, or formal devices of deformation, fragmentation, and literal bodily cuts. We witness therefore a dual dismissal in Neue Sachlichkeit’s shift toward the fully closed contours and the fully modeled bodies. The first abandons Expressionist angularity, and its radiating ruptures in favor of the figure’s newly enforced wholeness. The second literalizes the semiology of cuts and fragmentation from Dada photomontage and collage and redeployes these devices as surgical instruments: either, as in Dix, to lay bare the traumatized prosthetic body and the subject’s threadbare existence; or, as in Grosz, to literally slice the lid from the heads of the representatives of the ruling powers of the state, the Church, and the military, revealing their skull’s innermost recesses as stuffed with newspapers or grotesque steaming piles of feces. These travesties of the semiological radicality of Cubism articulate the simultaneous bankruptcy of the bourgeois subject as figuration, as much as they recognize that the proletarian subject can not yet be presented as the unified agent of a new history.

The Neue Sachlichkeit artists’ inability to assume a position of class identity and agency became the third fundamental reason for the movement’s internal rifts. It is not surprising then that they occupied the full spectrum of these contradictions. These ranged from the German adaptations of the Italian antimodernist *pittura metafisica* or the French *rappel à l’ordre* (such as Schrimpf, Mense, Kanoldt) to the radical extensions of Grosz’s and John Heartfield’s Dada aesthetic toward a new culture of the proletarian public sphere. Or they ranged from the cynical and melancholic attempts by the ex-Dadaist Christian Schad to pose as an Old Master of

2 • Max Beckmann, *The Night*, 1918–19

Oil on canvas, 133 × 154 (52½ × 60½)

portrait painting (even if his portraits for the most part depicted bohemians and aristocrats situated at the margins of the newly established social hierarchy), to the printed typologies of the proletariat produced by Franz Wilhelm Seiwert (1894–1933) and Gerd Arntz (1900–88) in the context of the Cologne Progressives group (Seiwert, writing in the group's journal *A-Z* suggested in 1928 that New Objectivity was neither new nor objective, but rather, the opposite of both). In 1928 Arntz would codesign the pictograms for Isotype, the collectively accessible sign language analyzing the current conditions of social, political, and economic relations in the publications of the radical Viennese sociologist Otto Neurath.

It appears then that these conflicts between high art and mass culture, those of class identity and social relations, were literally acted out in the opposition between a renewed emphasis on the artisanal foundations of artistic production on the one hand and a

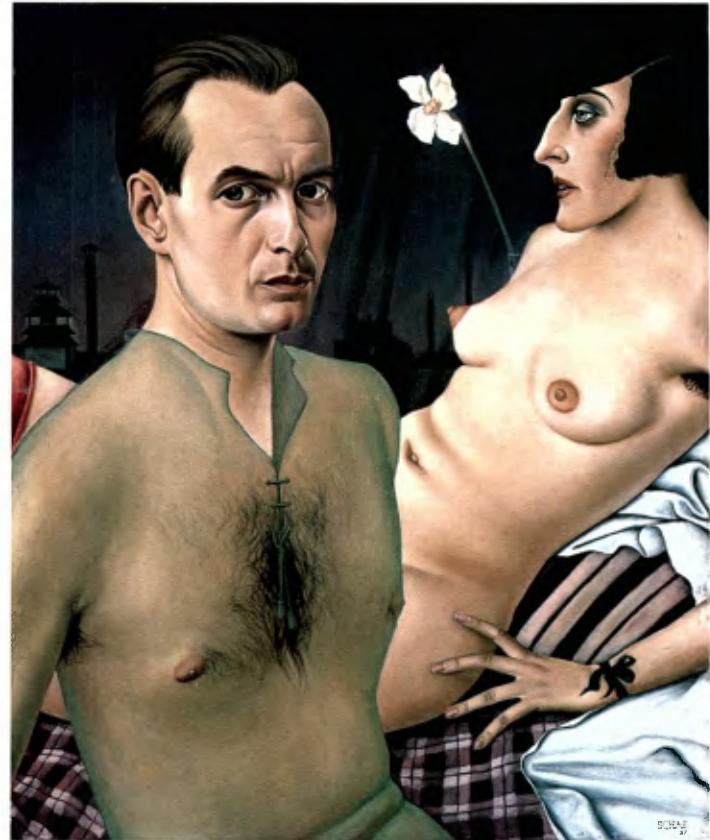
commitment to the newly emerging apparatus of technical (that is, photographic) reproduction and mass cultural distribution on the other. Not surprisingly, the site where this battle was fought most actively was the portrait, seemingly one of the most venerable pictorial genres (even though it had been decisively ▲ deconstructed at the high moment of Analytical Cubism).

The “objective” portrait, the “human” subject

We find an enormously complex (and numerous) typology of portrait conceptions at the center of Neue Sachlichkeit. Starting with the post-Expressionist portraits of Beckmann, who remained committed throughout his entire oeuvre to the superannuated probing of the self, the artist seems to have been unable to relinquish not only the idea of a humanistically defined, self-motivated

subjectivity, but also the conviction that his was a function to provide privileged forms of knowledge and insight. Schad's *Self-Portrait with Model* [3] brings these tropes of portraiture to a level of ostentatious self-consciousness where they become almost grotesque. In a cold confrontation, he depicts himself in the dress and pose of a Renaissance master (such as the transparent shirt in Bartolomeo Veneto's *Allegorical Portrait* [1507]). But the photographic realism in the depiction of his urbane physiognomy, and the mannered play on the fabric's transparency and the skin's opacity, manifestly contradict all claims to any historical continuity that either the genre and iconography of the self-portrait or the recitation of the most skillful traditions of painting could establish. His dubious female companion (as so often in Schad, she oscillates between prostitute and aristocratic bohemian, transvestite and *femme fatale*) is adorned in this instance with a sadistic cut to her face, undoubtedly inflicted by male property claims, clearly demarcating modernity.

At the other extreme of the spectrum of Neue Sachlichkeit portraiture one would find Dix's almost obsessive derision of the genre. Galvanizing his Expressionist legacy with the acid of caricature, Dix stripped his sitters of all pretenses and staged their subjecthood as either victim or prop of social construction. In his portrait of the journalist Sylvia von Harden [4], the attributes of the New Woman (bobbed hair, cigarette, highly fashionable flapper dress, and drink) are both celebrated and derided simultaneously, most manifestly in the gesticulation of the hypertrophic



3 • Christian Schad, *Self-Portrait with Model*, 1927

Oil on canvas, 76 x 61.5 (29 1/2 x 24 1/4)



4 • Otto Dix, *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden*, 1926

Mixed media on wood, 120 x 88 (47 1/4 x 34 3/4)

hands. This attitude of extreme ambiguity also governs one of the relatively rare portraits painted by George Grosz at the height of his Neue Sachlichkeit phase, the portrait of the writer and critic Max Hermann Neisse [5]. In distinction to Dix's caricaturesque hyperbole, Grosz by that time seems to have cooled his passion for caricature as modernism's countermodel, to which his friend, the historian of the medium Eduard Fuchs, had introduced him earlier in the decade. This intensified ambiguity, however, in which photography and caricature seem to recount their joint historical origins, could not be more appropriate to a quintessential *neuschlich* sitter like the critic Max Hermann Neisse, whose writings would soon thereafter shift from supporting Communist Party poets like Johannes R. Becher to championing the conservative Expressionist, and eventually fascist, Gottfried Benn.

Grosz, who had referred to himself as having "the character of an icepack" had been programmatic in his changing approach to the subject and its representation. Thus he wrote in an essay entitled "On some of my recent paintings" in *Das Kunstblatt* of 1921:

I am trying once again to draw a totally realistic picture of the world. If one makes an effort to develop a totally lucid and limpid style, one comes inevitably close to Carrà. Nevertheless

5 • George Grosz, *The Poet, Max Hermann Neisse*, 1927

Oil on canvas, 59.4 x 74 (23 3/8 x 29 1/8)

everything separates me from him, who wants to be appreciated in metaphysical terms and whose problematic is totally bourgeois.... Man in my paintings is no longer represented with a deep exploration of his confused psyche, but as a collectivist concept, almost mechanical. Individual destiny has no longer any importance whatsoever.

It has become evident, even if only fairly recently, that in the battle between photography and painting, between the machine and antiquity, the latter lost out. It is most certainly true on the territory of the portrait, where the true genius of Neue Sachlichkeit ▲ is August Sander, whose systematic archive of the multiplicity of possible social subject positions was recorded on the verge of the fascism that would annihilate them all. Here the photographic archive is infinitely more relevant to the history of the portrait than any of the above-mentioned painterly attempts to come to terms with the crisis of subjectivity in the twenties. Helmut Lethen has

called photography during that period "an instrument of definition," that has generated the "photographic physiognomies of Modernity in which the signatures of the individual have become assimilated to the conditions of technical reproduction." BB

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Oskar Schlemmer publishes *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, presenting the mannequin and the automaton as models of the modern performer; other artists, especially women involved in Dada, explore the allegorical potential of the doll and the puppet.

Why were so many different artists in the teens and twenties—whether associated with Dada, Surrealism, or Neue Sachlichkeit, Futurism, Constructivism, or ▲ the Bauhaus—drawn to such figures as the doll and the puppet, the mannequin and the automaton? Rarely treated as art per se (for example, Paul Klee never exhibited the fifty hand puppets he made between 1916 and 1925 for his son), such toys and curiosities were so attractive, in large part, because they were so ambiguous. At once evoking prehistoric times (the earliest votive objects and effigies of the dead resemble dolls) and contemporary life (the modern subject as a construction to manipulate), these figures also possessed some of the outsider interest of folk art and some of the affective power of tribal art. At the same time, too, they were distinct from these other objects of modernist enthusiasm.

Philosophical toys

Some of the artists in question here were influenced by celebrated texts by Heinrich von Kleist, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Charles Baudelaire, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Sigmund Freud, who were also intrigued by dolls and puppets. In one influential essay, “On the Marionette Theater” (1810), Kleist presents the marionette as the very image of innocence: “Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god.” So, too, in “The Philosophy of Toys” (1853) Baudelaire ponders the paradox of an inert figure endowed with a special force, here from the vantage of the child, for whom the toy represents not only “the first concrete example of art” but also “the first metaphysical stirring.” However, this stirring can turn aggressive, even sadistic, according to Baudelaire, as the child strives “to get at and see the soul” of the toy, shaking it, banging it, finally prying it open, only to be devastated by the discovery of its utter soullessness. “This moment marks the beginnings of stupor and melancholy,” the poet concludes.

Rilke, too, sees the doll as a thing of intense ambivalence in his 1914 text “On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel” (Pritzel was a Munich maker of emaciated and erotic figurines for adults, well known to German artists involved in doll-making such as Emmy • Hennings and Hans Bellmer). Initially, the doll attracts our deep

sympathy as a special object, even an intimate friend, Rilke writes, but “we soon realized we could not make it into a thing or a person, and in such moments it became a stranger to us”; eventually it is “unmasked as the gruesome foreign body on which we squandered our purest affection.” Finally, a few years later in “The Uncanny” ▲ (1919), Freud theorizes the ambivalence that such figures so often incite. Prompted in part by famous tales about automata by Hoffmann, Freud argues that these objects produce a confusion between the animate and the inanimate, the human and the inhuman, which we register as eerie or uncanny, because it suggests that what is most alien to us—like death—is sometimes evoked by what is most familiar—like a favorite doll.

In this manner, such figures as marionettes and automata came to represent near-opposite values: on the one hand, principles of rationality and causality championed by the Enlightenment and, on the other, experiences of the irrational and the marvelous explored by Romantics such as Hoffmann. These divergent associations persisted in the modernist period. In Futurism, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus, these figures often appear sleek, almost perfect, so many avatars of a new (super)human to come; while in Dada, Surrealism, and Neue Sachlichkeit, they are usually broken and fragmentary, as if thrown together out of discordant parts, in a bitter riposte to the technological ideals promoted by the former movements. In this case, even when produced from scratch, dolls, puppets, and the like sometimes appear as emblems of a private childhood or relics of a collective past, in which guises they can carry a sense of aura or, again, of uncanniness. (The possible connection here between the psychologically repressed and the socially outmoded was of special interest to the Surrealists, who searched for forgotten things redolent of such associations in flea • markets and other marginal sites; Walter Benjamin was intrigued by old dolls for similar reasons.) In fact, even when posed as portents of a technological future, figures like marionettes and automata might signify ambiguously and ambivalently; it was in this era, after all, that “the robot” was invented in an updating of Frankenstein’s monster as an industrial worker-machine that runs amok, turning murderously on its human creator. (The term was coined by the Czech playwright Karel Čapek, who developed this theme in his 1921 play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, while

Fritz Lang offered its most charged embodiment in the vampish robot Maria, who inspires the working masses to a disastrous rebellion in his 1927 film *Metropolis*.)

Given these multiple guises, no one motive or meaning can be ascribed to the appearance of dolls and puppets in modernist art. However, we might see these figures as so many reflections on the changed status of object-relations in modern Europe of the teens and twenties, especially the relations of humans to machines and commodities during a period of intensive industrialization, international war, and frenetic consumerism. At both poles of production and consumption, this new political economy was often identified with the United States—with its Fordist procedures of industrial labor, on the one hand, and its new forms of mass entertainment, ▲ such as jazz and movies, on the other. Indeed, “Americanism” became the shorthand for the Second Industrial Revolution that swept through Europe at this time, bringing new means of transportation and reproduction in its wake (such as automobiles, airplanes, news photography, and fast-speed film), all of which underlay “the new vision” promulgated in turn by modernists like



1 • Emmy Hennings with doll, 1917

Photographer unknown



2 • Hannah Höch with doll, 1921

Photographer unknown

▲ László Moholy-Nagy. (It was for related reasons that some artists were also drawn to the photographic motion-studies of Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey.) In this context, the automata and mannequins that appear in the various movements of the period take on an allegorical valence, as charged figures of horror or delight at the pervasive becoming-machine and becoming-commodity of the modern subject. Some artists mocked this condition, ● as Dadaists like Max Ernst did in his caustic portraits of humans as dysfunctional automata, while others thrilled to it, as Futurists like ■ F. T. Marinetti did in his hyperbolic celebrations of the new prosthetic man raised to the superhuman status of machine-weapon.

Just as importantly, the dolls and puppets that also appear at this time point to a new performative dimension in artistic practice, which is especially pronounced in the work of women involved in Dada. In Zurich, Sophie Taeuber and Emmy Hennings, who made marionettes and puppets respectively, were brilliant stage-presences, while in Berlin Hannah Höch also interacted with dolls of her own making (importantly, all three were photographed with their creations as well [1–3]). For these women, such figures were vehicles of role-playing, of staging and testing models of femininity, of



3 • Sophie Taeuber with *Dada Head*, 1920

Photographer unknown

exploring female desire as well as feminine identity—an interest pressured by their association with prominent male Dadaists (Taeuber was married to Hans Arp, and Hennings to Hugo Ball, while Höch had a long affair with Raoul Hausmann). Of course, men might also use dolls to explore male desire, and some did so extravagantly: Oskar Kokoschka made a life-size doll, with which he would dine and travel publicly, while Bellmer photographed his manipulated *Poupées* in various scenes evocative of sadomasochistic fantasies. Meanwhile, others like Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia suggested less literal scenarios of erotic (dis)connection in their “bachelor machines”—scenarios that point to the possible effects of mechanization and commodification on modern sexuality. All of these concerns—the performative dimension of art, the doll and the puppet as primordial and charged examples of representation, the role of sexual difference in image-making, the possible connections between technology and sexuality—also have a bearing on contemporary art, which might underlie the renewed interest in such artists as Taeuber, Hennings, and Höch in recent years.

Folk theater and psychoanalytic travesty

Emmy Hennings made puppets and drew dolls as part of her varied career as artist, poet, and performer [1]. Her dolls appear waifish, almost spectral, while her puppets are rough, like rag dolls, in keeping with the brash masks produced by Marcel Janco for performances at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, where Hennings

was the star attraction. In her pre-Dada days she had worked as a chanteuse in Munich, where she met Lotte Pritzel, who influenced her later doll-making. Hennings performed with her creations occasionally, and identified with them always: photographed with her dolls, she also referred to them in her writing. “When man lives, acts, he is an automaton, a doll,” Hennings once wrote, “yet how sensitive he is as a doll.” As suggested here, her dolls and puppets seemed to represent a psychological split for Hennings—a doubling with special resonance for her life as artist and performer: “I sit there in front of my mirror and I can observe this doll. I know that I can double myself.”

Little is known about the dolls produced by Hennings, and not much more about the ones made by Hannah Höch—though she did exhibit two at the famous Dada Fair in Berlin in 1920. Stitched together out of various pieces of fabric, with beads and buttons for eyes and breasts, and clumps of yarn for hair, these dolls appear deranged, closer to the art of the insane than to the toys of children; they might also anticipate the tribal figures that Höch reassembled in her provocative series of photomontages “From an Ethnographic Museum” (1929). Sitting on top of a wood case near the entrance of the Fair, the two dolls announced the Dada exhibition (which featured more notorious examples of costumed mannequins) as a site of play that was both transgressive and regressive, suggesting, as the dolls did, an uninhibited world of anger and play.

Like Hennings, Höch was photographed with her creations, and she, too, performed an ambiguous identification with them. In two photographs with another doll, Höch is posed in the guise of a seated mother holding her child and then of a dancer paired with her partner (her costume rhymes with that of the doll [2]). Suggested here are two themes developed in her greatest images of this period—themes that are dialectically related. On the one hand, Höch implies that the modern subject is hollowed out by mechanization and commodification; her famous collage *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Beer Belly of the Weimar Republic* (c. 1919) is a panorama of this transformation as visited on German subjects soon after the fall of the Kaiser, who appears here precisely as a broken doll, as do representatives of Weimar culture on the rise (for example, Hausmann pops up as a little robot dangling from the corrupted body of the Kaiser). On the other hand, Höch also presents this transformation as a liberation; the same collage is as much a joyous bursting-forth of the new order as it is a brutal autopsy of the old regime. Her photomontages of the early twenties featuring women are also dialectical in this way: they present “the new woman” of the era as subject to cultural stereotypes and manufactured desires imposed from without; at the same time, even as this woman is a construction, she is shown to possess an agency of her own—even the agency to transform her constructed image, as Höch does in these works.

Important though the making of puppets and the like was for Hennings and Höch, it was central to Sophie Taeuber, who was accomplished in the crafts (she taught for thirteen years at the Applied Arts and Crafts School in Zurich, supporting Arp as she

did so). For a 1918 staging of *The King Stag* by the eighteenth-century Venetian satirist Carlo Gozzi at the Théâtre Zurichois de Marionnettes, Taeuber produced no less than seventeen painted marionettes out of wood and metal in geometric shapes (mostly cylinders and cones) that are sometimes repeated in the absurdist fashion of Dada (she added headdresses, fabric, pearls, and feathers to gender or otherwise distinguish some of the figures [4]). For this production, the Gozzi tale of court intrigue was radically transformed: relocated to the forest outside Burghölzli, the psychiatric hospital of the University of Zurich with which Carl Jung, a Freud apostate, was associated, the play became a spoof of psychoanalysis—of its claims to authority as well as its internecine battles then underway. For here, the king and his beloved are at the mercy of three characters named Freud Analytikus, Dr. Komplex (a representative of Jung), and the alluring Urlibido, all of whom struggle for control over the royals. It is not clear whom Taeuber and friends favored in the fight; though Zurich was the headquarters of Jungian analysis and her sister worked as a secretary to Jung, Dr. Komplex appears no less ridiculous than Freud Analytikus (both figures sport headdresses and skirts).

Like other Zurich Dadaists, Taeuber was interested in ritual. Trained by Rudolf von Laban, a great innovator in modern dance, she participated as both choreographer and dancer at the Cabaret Voltaire, and one extant photograph shows her dancing wildly in a

Janco mask and an Arp costume, while another captures her with other dancers in Hopi Indian dress of her own design. This might suggest that Taeuber favored the Jungian universe of ritualistic regression (as did Ball), and her marionettes might indeed be read as Jungian archetypes. Yet, even when festooned, her figures are oddly blank, and the note of parody of depth psychology is difficult to miss, especially as the objects are puppets to be manipulated, and some are robotic in appearance (Max Ernst comes to mind here, especially his piston men in *The Hat Makes the Man* or *The Self-Constructed Small Machine* [both 1919]).

This impression is deepened by several *Dada Heads* that Taeuber made in the two years after *The King Stag* marionettes (only four survive). Turned on a lathe, two of these painted wood pieces present an ovoid head with a trapezoidal nose and a cylindrical neck set on a base made of two inverted cones, while the other two substitute slightly different geometries; all four are colored in decorative, almost proto-Art Deco patterns (one is tattooed “1920 Dada” [3]). As the curator Anne Umland has noted, these heads are “anti-monumental and antimimetic,” and they “take deft parodic aim at the historic characteristics of portrait busts.” Two are subtitled *Portrait of Hans Arp*, but offer no indication of why they might be representations of Arp, so blank, so nonsubjective are they (Taeuber might have signed them “the woman who mistook her husband for a hat stand”). In this respect, the heads are close to another group of



4 • Sophie Taeuber, *Dr. Komplex*, 1918

Turned, painted wood, brass, and metal joints, 38.5 x 18.5 (15 1/8 x 7 1/4)



5 • Sophie Taeuber and Hans Arp, *Untitled (Amphora)*, 1917

Turned, painted wood, height 30 (11 1/8), diameter 15.2 (5 1/8)

wood pieces Taeuber turned with Arp between 1916 and 1918 [5]. These pieces evoke domestic objects—they are subtitled “chalice,” “poudrier,” “bowl,” and so on—but they too are resolutely neutral, a composite of negations—not aesthetic, not utilitarian, not figurative, not abstract, not freely invented, not readymade ...

Paul Klee began his hand puppets after a June 1916 visit to Zurich, where he might have seen the first Taeuber marionettes; but his are much more expressive, made as they were for his young son Felix. The first eight of the fifty puppets (thirty survive) were produced for his ninth birthday; Klee resumed them after the war, with a second group added in 1919, and after Felix became a student at the Bauhaus in fall 1921, new figures were added every year for performances there until 1925. A former associate of the Blaue Reiter, Klee shared the interest of the Expressionists in folk art, an interest the puppets manifest: the first group is based on characters from the German version of Punch and Judy theater seen at fairs (the Klees knew them from the Auer Dult, a traditional Munich flea market). The hero is Kasperl, a vulgar but crafty soul who is usually aided by his wife Gretl and his friend Seppel in endless battles with Death, the Devil, the Grandmother, the Policeman, and the Crocodile—battles from which Kasperl eventually emerges the victor. Of the first group made by Klee, only one puppet, Death, remains; with its white skull dominated by large black spots for eye sockets and a horizontal grid of clenched teeth, it is an impressive specter.

Bourgeois households often contained little Kasperl and Gretl theaters, and Felix staged his own shows at home, for which Klee

also supplied the miniature sets (Felix later became a director of theater and opera). Over time, Klee added new characters to the stock types, some based on personal acquaintances (he included a self-portrait as well), others on public stereotypes (such as the German Nationalist, the Russian Peasant, the Bearded Frenchman). All the heads are worked in plaster, which is sometimes modeled with gauze, then painted; as with Kasperl and Gretl puppets at the fairs, the clothes are made of remnants (occasionally Klee was assisted in this task by an actual doll-maker, Sasha von Sinner). Like the other works at issue here, the hand puppets are not mimetic; in fact, some resemble the fantasmatic figures, often ▲ grotesque or ghostly, that appear in Klee’s drawings and paintings. If anything, the puppets he made at the Bauhaus are more radical in their nonrepresentational use of odd materials and found objects (shells, nails, matchboxes, etc.), which might reflect his experiments in the Bauhaus *Vorkurs* at this time. *Electrical Spook* (1923) is the strangest of the group [6]: a sort of Bauhaus version of Death, its body is marked by a vertical stripe of red fabric, and its plaster neck supports a head that is a ceramic electrical socket. Is this what a folk spook looks like in a technological age—or does Klee suggest that modern technology possesses its own kind of uncanniness?

The transfiguration of the human form

Already master of the sculpture workshop at the Bauhaus, Oskar Schlemmer was named master of the theater workshop, too, in 1923. On the one hand, like Klee, he was interested in the stock types of folk theater: “The number of genuine stage costumes has stayed very small,” Schlemmer writes in *The Theater of the Bauhaus* (1925), the fourth in the series of pedagogical Bauhaus Books. “They are the standardized costumes of the *commedia dell’arte*: Harlequin, Pierrot, Columbine, etc; and they have remained basic and authentic to this day.” On the other hand, he was caught up in the technological turn—the new vision—that swept through the Bauhaus upon the arrival of Moholy-Nagy in 1923, which also marks *The Theater of the Bauhaus*. “The history of the theater is the history of the transfiguration of the human form,” Schlemmer argues, in line with Moholy-Nagy, and “the new potentials of technology” have prompted “the boldest fantasies.” In this respect, Schlemmer was most concerned to address what he saw as the key forces of the time—abstraction in art and mechanization in society—and to elaborate the new relations between man and space they set up. According to Schlemmer, the old illusionistic theater subordinated space to man, the stage set to the human drama, while the new abstract theater must reverse this hierarchy and relate man to space. The most direct way to do so was to render the human more architectonic in form, to make of man an “ambulant architecture,” but Schlemmer advanced two other models in his own work that were somewhat more practical: the human form reconfigured either in geometric shapes in order to express certain laws of motion, which he calls “the technical organism” or “the automaton,” or in functional terms in order to express certain laws of the body,



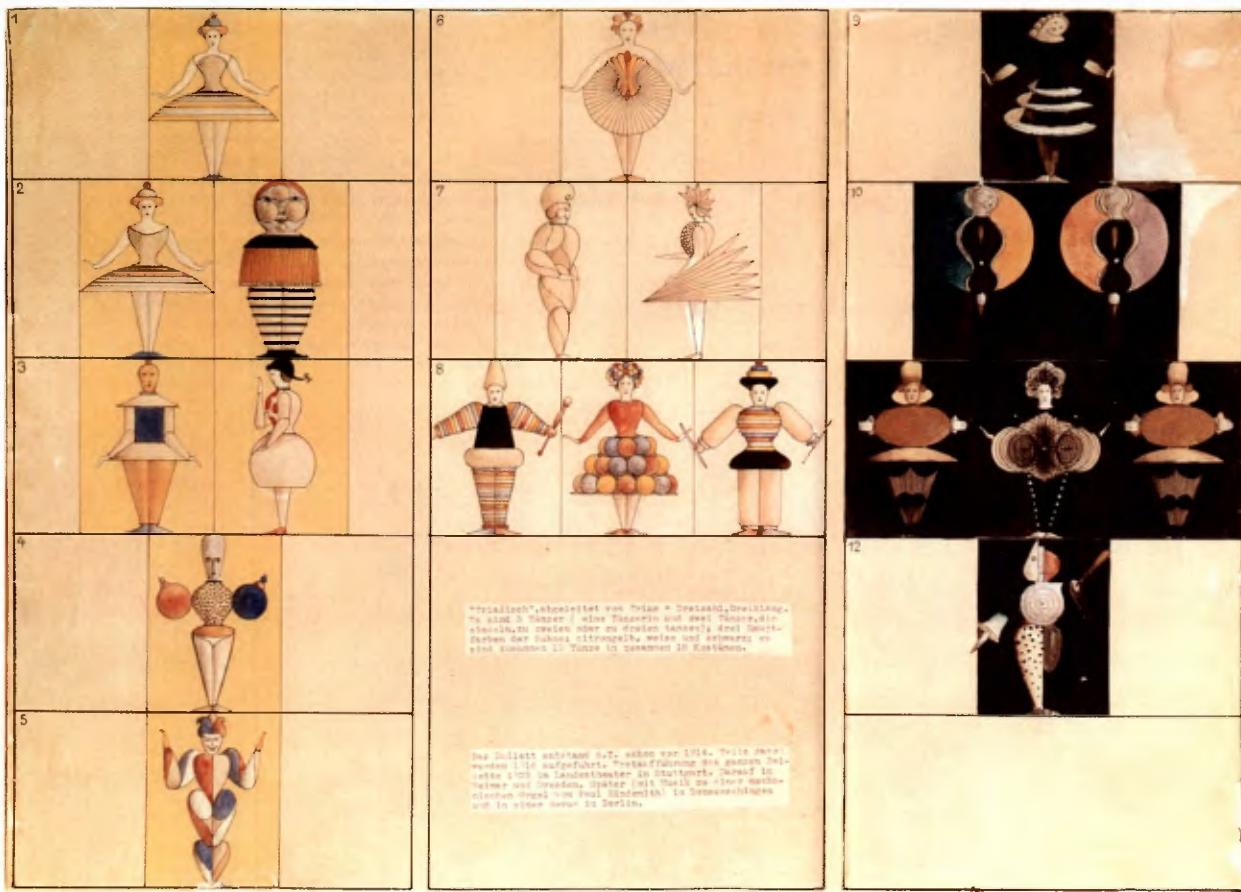
6 • Paul Klee, *Electrical Spook*, 1923

Ceramic electrical socket, metal, plaster, fabric, paint, and glaze, height 38 (15)

▲ 1922

● 1923

■ 1929



7 • Oskar Schlemmer, *Das Triadische Ballett, Figurenplan* (Figure-plan for *The Triadic Ballet*), 1924

Pencil, ink, watercolor, and gouache, 38.1 × 53.3 (15 × 21)

1920-1929

which he calls “the marionette.” Led in this direction by his “endeavor to free man from his physical bondage,” Schlemmer favored the automaton and the marionette in particular because they “permit any kind of movement.” Here, then, like Kleist and Hoffmann (both of whom he cites), Schlemmer sees the figures of the marionette and the automaton as images of godly grace and uncanny power, not of mechanistic oppression—though it can be debated whether his performers suggest a new freedom in the end. (In this regard, his experiments diverge from the revolutionary theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold and others in the Soviet Union during the same period, who produced plays featuring anti-illusionistic sets by such artists as Liubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, and Aleksandra Ekster; this kind of theater replaced the psychological realism of bourgeois drama with a “biomechanical” technique of acting that, in effect, adapted Taylorism to the stage.)

The Triadic Ballet was the most celebrated of Schlemmer productions at the Bauhaus [7]. Called “triadic” because it was performed in three parts by three dancers (two of whom were male), the ballet included twelve different dances performed in no less than eighteen different costumes, most constructed of padded cloth and stiff papier-mâché painted in metallic and other colors. A few of the *commedia dell’arte* characters prized by Schlemmer are still legible here, as are a few types of the classical ballet, but there are also updated clowns and jesters as well as a robotic knight.

Schlemmer describes the first part of the dance, set against a yellow backdrop, as a “gay burlesque,” the second part, set on a rose stage, as “ceremonious and solemn,” and the third part, set on a black stage, as “a mystical fantasy.” The *Triadic Ballet* thus contains aspects of a folk theater, a variety show, and a medieval ritual, as if these disparate cultural forms—and the conflicted social forces they register—could be reconciled in a new template for performance in the machine age. “Let’s not complain about mechanization, but rather let us delight in mathematics!” Schlemmer exhorts his contemporaries in the 1926 essay “The Mathematics of the Dance,” where he sublimates mechanization “as a vehicle for a substance which is spiritual, abstract, metaphysical, and ultimately religious in nature.” If *Electrical Spook* suggests how unlikely the combination of folk tradition and technological modernity is, *The Triadic Ballet* makes the very attempt at such reconciliation seem like “the boldest fantasy.” HF

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On May 3, a public screening of avant-garde cinema titled “The Absolute Film” is held in Berlin: on the program are experimental works by Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, Walter Ruttmann, and Fernand Léger that continue the project of abstraction by filmic means.

One of the origins of abstract cinema was abstract painting; or, more precisely, one of its motives was to make this painting move, to animate its images somehow. Prompted by analogies to music already advanced by abstract ▲ painters such as Wassily Kandinsky and František Kupka, the pioneers of “absolute film,” who included the Russian-Danish-Finnish Léopold Survage (1879–1968), the Swede Viking Eggeling, and the Germans Hans Richter (1888–1976) and Walter Ruttmann (1887–1941), often thought in terms of rhythm and counterpoint and in forms like fugue and symphony. In fact, the notion of “absolute film” was modeled on the idea of “absolute music” put forward by Richard Wagner in the mid-nineteenth century; long seen as the least referential of the arts, music was taken to be the paragon of a medium concerned first and foremost with its own expressive properties. In some respects, then, abstract film was born of a marriage between avant-garde painting and post-Wagnerian music, often drawing its visual forms from the former and its temporal rhythms from the latter, all in an attempt to avoid (its practitioners might say “transcend”) both the referential

restrictions of straight photography and the narrative conventions of popular cinema.

Rhythms in color and light

An early instance of this elaboration of abstraction, one that involved neither camera nor celluloid, is the 1913 project *Rhythme coloré* by Survage, who was based in Paris. It consists of more than one hundred drawings of nonobjective forms in lush watercolors on black backgrounds (most of the paper sheets are roughly 36 by 27 centimeters [approximately 14 by 10½ inches]). Meant to be seen in sequence, these shapes “sweep space,” as Survage put it, and sometimes appear to extend beyond the frame of the paper, which we come to regard almost as a cinematic screen. As we shift from sheet to sheet, the forms mutate: sometimes straight, then curved; sometimes separate, then combined; sometimes as though in close-up, then in long shot [1]. Yet, even as *Rhythme coloré* mimics filmic representation in these ways, it presents no referent and provides no scale. We might imagine bodies and spaces that



1 • Léopold Survage, *Rhythme coloré*, 1913

Watercolor and ink on paper on black paper-faced board, each 36 × 26.6 (14⅓ × 10½)

▲ 1908, 1913



2 • Viking Eggeling, *Symphonie diagonale*, 1921–4

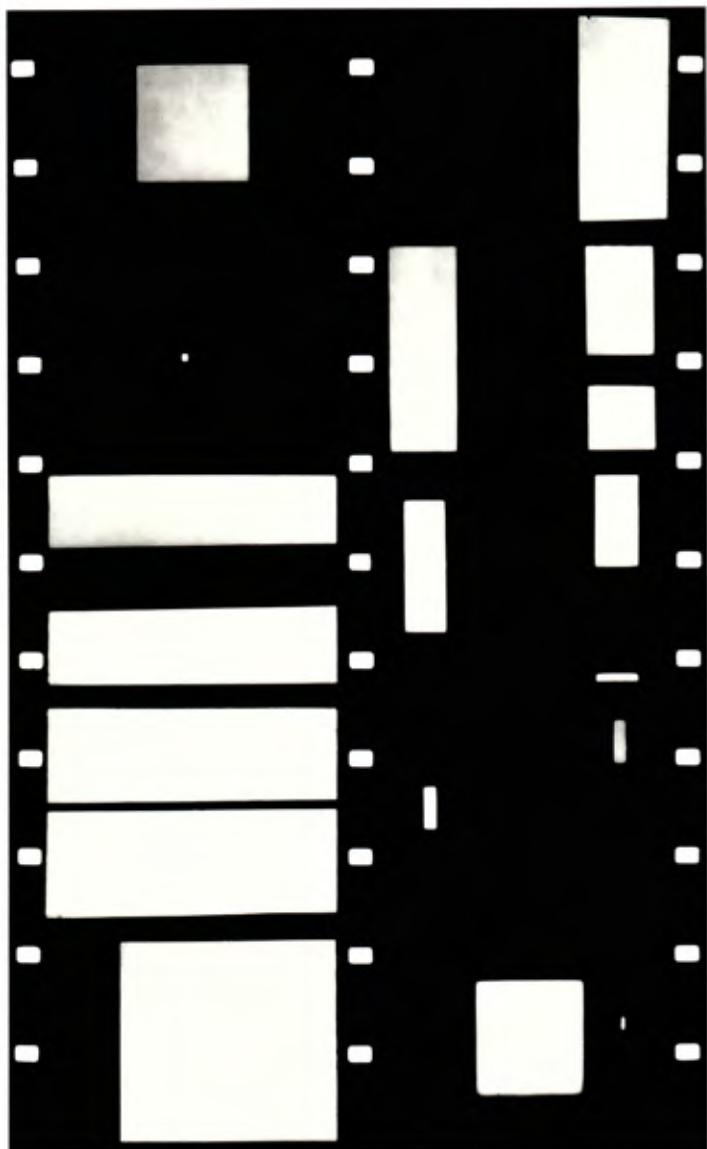
16mm film, black and white, silent, 7 minutes

are either tiny or vast—the movements of microscopic organisms, say, or the pathways of celestial light—but these remain projections in our minds. And it is projection in another sense that emerges as the subject here: luminous against the black backgrounds, the colored forms suggest prismatic light projected into darkness; that is, they suggest film at its most abstract—and perhaps at its most advanced (Survage here anticipates color film).

Survage planned to shoot his watercolors (he knew that many more would be needed to make a film of any length), and the French movie company Gaumont was interested for a time, but the outbreak of World War I dashed this project. However, his practice of “paper cinema” was soon developed by others. In Paris from 1911 to 1915, Eggeling came to know Survage, and he, too, produced abstract drawings, mostly in pencil on paper, which were also composed like separate shots in long sequences. Eggeling referred to these scrolls, most of which are horizontal in format, as “picture rolls”; some are as long as fifteen meters. By 1918, he was active in Zurich, where he quickly befriended Hans Richter, ▲ one of the ringleaders of Dada there; in 1919, as Dada waned in the Swiss city, the two men moved on to Berlin, where they worked for the next few years, both separately and together, at the Richter family home. “Here, in its highest perfection, was a level of visual

organization comparable to counterpoint in music,” Richter wrote about his first viewing of a picture roll by Eggeling, “a kind of controlled freedom or emancipated discipline, a system within which chance could be given a comprehensible meaning. This was exactly what I was now ready for.”

Eggeling was able to film only one scroll before his untimely death in May 1925, just sixteen days after “The Absolute Film” screening at the UFA Palast in Berlin. For *Symphonie diagonale* (1921–4), which was shown at this screening, he drew black lines on white paper so that, when filmed and projected, they would appear as white figures on a black ground: immediately this redoubles our basic experience of the light and dark of the cinema [2]. For each sequence, Eggeling began with a complete drawing, shot it, then masked part of it with tin foil, shot it again, and so on. At certain points, he alternated this process of subtraction with one of addition, unmasking the given drawing in increments, which he also then filmed; sometimes, too, he shot in a mirror so that his forms reappear but in inverted position. Throughout the film, white lines emerge, quickly combine into complex figures, then withdraw piece by piece, finally to disappear altogether, only to be replaced by other figures—and it all happens as though Eggeling has no part in the production. At times, the figures suggest musical



3 • Hans Richter, *Rhythmus 21*, 1921

35mm film, black and white, silent, 3 minutes

notations or architectural diagrams, yet in the end *Symphonie diagonale* prompts even fewer associations than does *Rhythme coloré*. We are left with the impression not only of abstract forms but also of autonomous movement—these lines seem to beat with a life of their own.

Eggeling positioned his forms on the oblique—hence the diagonal of *Symphonie diagonale*—in a way that dynamizes the rectangle of the screen. This kind of counterpoint was essential to his work, as Richter was quick to see: “Eggeling tried to discover which ‘expressions’ a form would and could take under the various influences of ‘opposites’: little against big, light against dark, one against many, top against bottom, and so forth.” This account is even more fitting for his own abstract films, of which Richter made three during this period: *Rhythmus 21* (1921), which was shown under its original title *Film ist Rhythmus* at the second showing of “The Absolute Film,” a week after the first; *Rhythmus 23* (1923);

and *Rhythmus 25* (1925). *Rhythmus 21* establishes the language for the other two: first singly and then in combination, white rectangles emerge from the black background, moving horizontally or vertically across the screen, sometimes expanding and advancing, sometimes contracting and receding [3]; intermittently, the rectangles switch to black and the background changes to white, but the basic pattern of rectangles in movement, transformation, and reversal remains constant. If Eggeling favored line and thus the pictorial aspect of abstract film, Richter privileged plane and thus the spatial dimension, and that dimension takes on depth as his planes advance and recede. Even more than Eggeling, then, Richter presents filmic abstraction as a perpetual diagramming of cinematic space. Yet in neither case is this diagramming bloodless; in fact, it has a kind of pulse that one might associate with the pumping of a heart (in the Eggeling) or the movement of sex (in the Richter)—as though the body were evacuated as a figure only to return precisely as a rhythm.

The rectangles of the *Rhythmus* films redouble the frame, and this reflexivity is central to their effect. Yet the films are not medium-specific in a reductive way; indeed, for Richter the forms are less important than the intervals between them. “I went on to take parts of the rectangular screen and move these *parts* together or against each other,” he wrote of *Rhythmus 21*. “These rectangles are not *forms*, they are parts of movement.... [T]he relationship between the positions becomes the thing to be perceived, not the single or individual form. One doesn’t see the form or object anymore but rather the relationship. In this way you see a kind of rhythm.” It is this differential understanding of the fundamental elements of film that makes the *Rhythmus* pieces the quintessential examples of abstract cinema. Certainly it allowed Richter both to control his forms and to motivate their meanings: “A vertical line was made meaningful by the horizontal, a strong line grew stronger by a weak one, a defined one was clear against an undefined one, and so forth. All of these discoveries became meaningful in light of our belief that a precise polar interrelationship of opposites was the key to an order, and once we understood this order we knew we could control this new freedom.”

An abstract medium for an abstract world

This ambition to define the basic components of film was close ▲ in spirit to the aim of the De Stijl movement with regards to painting and design, and indeed Richter and Eggeling were close to Theo van Doesburg, the leader of De Stijl, who visited them in Berlin for several weeks in late 1920, not long before *Rhythmus 21* was created and *Symphonie diagonale* was begun. In De Stijl, the analysis of a given art form was only the first step in the process; the next move, the key one, was to integrate this deconstructed medium with other forms in a new totality of the arts, an updated • *Gesamtkunstwerk*. (A similar project animated G: *Material zur elementaren Gestaltung* [G: Materials for Elemental Form-Creation], a syncretic journal in equal parts Dadaist and Constructivist

that Richter founded and edited from 1923 to 1926.) If abstract film drew on painting and music in its beginnings, it soon implicated architecture as well. "The space of the viewers of *Rhythmus 21* fuses with the space of the film," the film historian Philippe-Alain Michaud has argued. "They no longer watch the film as a theatrical representation, they optically live it. If film becomes architecture, the screen becomes the ultimate unit of architecture." This is an expanded concept of abstract cinema, one represented at "The Absolute Film" by the first piece in the sixty-minute program, a multimedia spectacle by the German Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack (1893–1965), a member of the Bauhaus. In his *Tripartite Color Sonatina—Reflectory Color Plays* (1925), four people operated a device called a "color organ" that projected geometric shapes through optical filters and other devices onto a transparent screen, all to musical accompaniment. This *Lichtspiel*, or "light play," was in keeping with ideas put forward by László Moholy-Nagy in his ▲ *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (1925), in which the Bauhaus master anticipated an eventual dematerialization of art—from abstract painting into "optical expression" as such—by means of new technologies of light.

This was one tendency within absolute cinema: not only to make abstract films but to extend this filmic abstraction into the world at large. Another tendency aimed at a similar goal but from the opposite direction, for it involved the filming of an industrial-

capitalist world that was seen to be *already* abstract in its own ways. This approach was exemplified in "The Absolute Film" ▲ by *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) by Fernand Léger, who collaborated with the American filmmaker Dudley Murphy and the American composer George Antheil (the American artist Man Ray assisted too). *Ballet Mécanique* presents a panoply of cinematic devices—close-ups, dissolves, apertures, prisms, stop-motion shots, repeated sequences of new and found footage—but they appear as expressive elements in their own right, released from any narrative [4]. However, unlike most of his colleagues in abstract film, Léger did not eschew the human figure; on the contrary, he set people in delirious motion with objects, precisely in a "mechanical ballet" driven by a throbbing score featuring percussive pianos and wailing sirens. The film begins with a cartoon animation of Charlie Chaplin, the comic epitome of machine-age man, then shifts to a sequence of Katherine Murphy (wife of Dudley) on a swing; this sequence is repeated upside down; then, in a vertiginous move, the camera gets a turn on the swing. Soon all sorts of people and things are turning and gyrating—city-dwellers on amusement-park rides, pistons, wheels, and cogs in factories, and hats, shoes, wine bottles, and pots and pans on display. *Ballet Mécanique* thus becomes a dance of analogies between abstract geometries, mechanical parts, everyday commodities, and human features and limbs (we see repeated close-ups of Kiki de Montparnasse,



4 • Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, stills from *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924

35mm film, black and white, silent, 12 minutes

▲ 1925a



5 • Dziga Vertov, still from *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929

35mm film, black and white, 68 minutes

a star of the Parisian demimonde, especially her lipstick mouth and mascara eyes, as well as a cancan of female legs detached from any body). Film is an excellent match for the modern world, Léger suggests, as both are defined by mechanistic motion, and film must tend to the abstract because this world does so; in fact, film might be the ideal medium for the machine age because it, too, is both industrial and commercial.

▲ Trained as an architectural draftsman, Léger was a pioneer of abstract painting, yet even his prewar canvases are built from elements that seem to derive from body parts or machine parts or both. And as his paintings developed after the war, he always insisted that they were “realist”—so many objective renderings of a modern life that was given over to industrial production and commercial consumption—and he paints his urban surround precisely as a panorama of fragmented mechanisms, products, people, and signs. In time, this environment informed his model of painting too: like a machine, his painting became a device of interrelated parts and, like a product, a matter of clean outlines, bright colors, and shiny surfaces. Léger was drawn, as was his ● colleague Le Corbusier, to the emblematic objects of capitalist industry, and the processes that govern these “object types” seem to govern his art as well; even his human figures appear to be

subjected to mechanization and commodification—in a word, to capitalist abstraction. It is this modeling of the human figure on the machine and commodity that sets up “the mechanical ballet” of his film.

In “The Spectacle,” an essay published in 1924, the same year that *Ballet Mécanique* was produced, Léger describes a world where a new mobility of vision is dominant and “the shock of the surprise effect” rules, and he argues that the artist must not only “compete” with these conditions, but also “orchestrate” them: “We have found what we are competing with; we must renew the man-spectacle mechanically.... [T]hat vast spectacle is badly orchestrated; in fact, not orchestrated at all. The intensity of the street shatters our nerves and drives us crazy. Let’s tackle the problem in all its scope. Let’s organize the external spectacle.” Here, the film historian Malcolm Turvey has argued, “just as Richter neither accepts nor rejects the rationalism of modernity, Léger neither repudiates nor embraces the fragmentation of perception in modernity.” Rather, Léger represents the “surprise effect” of this spectacle—in part out of a delight in its vitality (even more than the forms in *Symphonie diagonale* and *Rhythmus 21* do the objects in *Ballet Mécanique* seem to come alive), in part to absorb its “shock,” and in part to push this spectacle further, with

the hope that modern subjects might somehow pass through it to another kind of social order altogether (for Léger, this order would be a Communist one).

Léger was not alone in this project. For example, in 1927 Walter Ruttmann produced *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, a new kind of documentary that intercuts abstract images with photographic shots of everyday life in the industrial metropolis. (Ruttmann was represented in “The Absolute Film” by three abstract pieces, *Lichtspiel Opus I, II, and III*, in which, like Eggeling and Richter, he emphasizes musical rhythm, even as he deviates from them with shapes that are both colored and expressive.) Other filmmakers exploited the devices of abstract cinema, too, in a concerted effort not merely to represent modern life, but also to enact its mediated perspectives in ways that photography (let alone painting) could not do. Exemplary here is the Soviet director known as Dziga Vertov (David Abelevich Kaufman; 1896–1954), whose *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) qualifies as a “city symphony” as well [5]. In fact, already by the moment of “The Absolute Film,” Soviet filmmakers had seized the mantle of advanced cinema. By 1925, Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) had proposed his theory of montage as a system of “attractions,” relieving film of any residual reliance on painting or music, a theory he put into practice in *Battleship Potemkin* of that same year, which was an international sensation. Within the avant-garde, too, abstract cinema was challenged by Dadaist and

- ▲ Surrealist films that, though hardly narrative in any conventional sense, were also far from abstract. (One of these productions, *Entr'acte*, a collaboration among the filmmaker René Clair, the artist Francis Picabia, and the composer Erik Satie, was the fifth, final, and somewhat incongruous entry in “The Absolute Film.”)
- artist Francis Picabia, and the composer Erik Satie, was the fifth, final, and somewhat incongruous entry in “The Absolute Film.”)

In this respect, though “The Absolute Film” garnered great interest (it sold out the vast Palast theater on the Kurfürstendamm, the largest cinema in Germany at the time), it marked an end as much as a beginning. Again, Eggeling died very soon after the event; Richter went on to direct other kinds of films, both documentary and narrative; and Ruttmann soon rejected abstract cinema altogether. Other filmmakers, such as the German Oskar Fischinger (1900–67), carried on with abstract experiments, but most were soon compelled to adapt these means to the ends of advertising, Hollywood cinema, or both. (Ruttmann used abstract animation for a short film for automobile tires as early as 1922; he also later assisted Leni Riefenstahl on the greatest of all Nazi propaganda films, *The Triumph of Will* [1935]). For the most part, “absolute film,” born of abstract painting circa 1913, was done in by the advent of synchronized sound circa 1929, which allowed film to be captured by an emergent studio system dedicated to narratives based on the theater or the novel. And the general suppression of modernist experimentation in the thirties, especially in Germany, dealt the death blow. However, like other avant-garde forms repressed at this time, abstract film returned in the postwar period, with the “structural film” and “expanded cinema” movements of the fifties and sixties, but that is another story. HF

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El Lissitzky's *Demonstration Room* and Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* are installed in Hanover, Germany: the architecture of the museum as archive and the allegory of modernist space as melancholia are dialectically conceived by the Constructivist and the Dadaist.

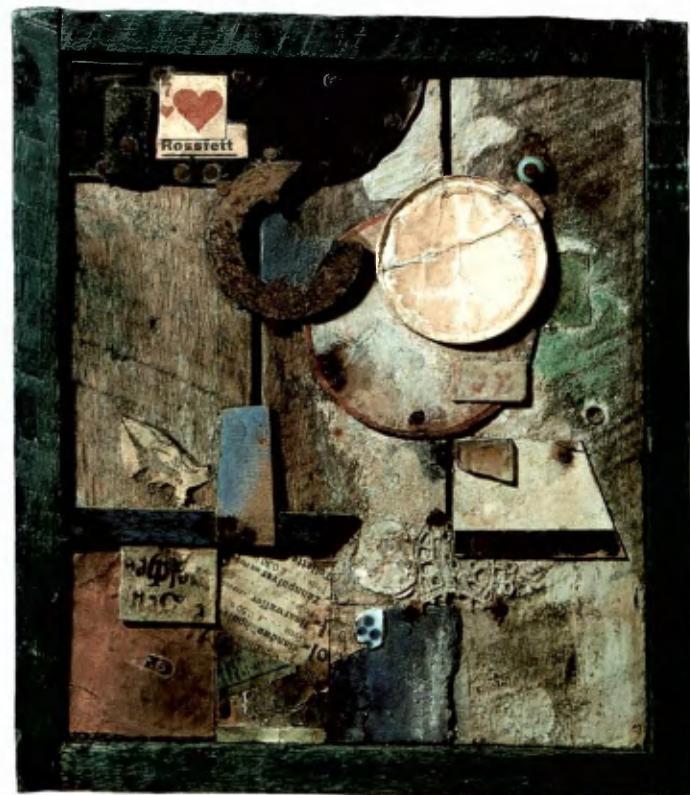
In July 1919 Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) jettisoned both his formation as an academically trained landscape and portrait painter and his recent past as a member of the German Expressionist avant-garde by publicly declaring his discovery of a new type of picture-making. The name he gave this new project was "Merz," a syllable fragmented from a larger word, *Kommerz*, which he had accidentally found on a torn advertisement for the Hannover Kommerzbank when wandering round his native Hanover. It was on the grounds of that fragment that Schwitters developed an aesthetic both of collage and of phonetic, textual, and graphic segmentation that became one of the key contributions to German Dada.

In his initial practice of Merz, however, Schwitters maintained all the idioms of the Expressionist and Futurist aesthetic that had been so influential for the German avant-garde during the late teens. In early Merz works, such as *Welten Kreise* (1919), one can trace both the dynamic vectors and force-lines of Cubo-Futurism and the chromatic scheme of Expressionist painting. Yet what radically alters works from this period is Schwitters's insertion of found metallic, wooden, or other debris collected in the streets [1]. Morphologically and formally, one could even go so far as to sense a distant echo of ▲ Francis Picabia's mechanomorphic works in these paintings. Yet, as with all responses that Schwitters makes, in each instance, the ● legacy—whether of Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, or Picabia's Dadaism—is transformed into what one could call a specific mode of "melancholic" response. In his reaction to the total transformation of painting into a technological object, or in his response to the assimilation of mechanomorphic forms to the shapes of the composition, or in his response to Expressionism's high-flown humanitarian ideals, Schwitters situates himself as an artist who returns to an allegorical reading of techno-scientific utopianism by countering it with a position of melancholic contemplation.

The debris in Schwitters's work was, quite logically, not accepted as a credible commitment to Dada practices; and already in early ■ 1919, the leader of the Berlin Dada circle Richard Huelsenbeck had denounced Schwitters as "the Biedermeier" of German Dada (a reference to an early-nineteenth-century style in German art and life, and a term often used pejoratively to describe something as conventional or bourgeois), thereby calling attention to Schwitters's manifest concern for a continuation of painting as a space of

contemplative experience. As Schwitters himself never tired of saying, the technological objects, the found materials in his work, only functioned in order to conceive of a new type of *painting*. They were never theorized as readymades that would displace painting, or as morphologies that deny the validity of drawing, or as chromatic objects that dismantle the legacy of visual intensity in Expressionist art. In all instances, Schwitters's ultimate goal remained one of conceiving what he called a "painting for contemporary experience."

A similar change took place in Schwitters's drawings at this time. Here the Expressionist idiom of angular, jagged profiles was suddenly juxtaposed with the mechanized imprint of found office stamps that Schwitters had collected and now deployed as elements of mechanical drawing. Yet, as in the collages, the emphasis stays focused on the construction of an object that is primarily legible as



1 • Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbild Rossfett* (Horse Fat), c. 1919
Assemblage. 20.4 x 17.4 (8 x 6 1/2)

poetic or pictorial, never reducing the compositional structure or ▲ the reading order to a fully homogenized, mechanically produced image such as in Picabia's mechanomorphic portraits. Rather, the drawings operate within the tension between manual inscription and technologically based textual production.

A corresponding ambiguity can be traced in Schwitters's practice of abstract sound poetry. This lifelong project began most notoriously with *An Anna Blume*, a masterpiece of German alogical verse in the tradition of early-twentieth-century writers such as Christian Morgenstern. But if, in its shrill and ludicrous exclamation and its florid homage, Schwitters's writing is first of all a Dada derision of both the bathos of Expressionism and the sentimentality of turn-of-the-century German writing, its position nonetheless remains ambiguous. For once again, rather than focusing on the linguistic self-referentiality that Russian Cubo-Futurist poetry forges in the context of a Formalist theorization ● of language, Schwitters's poetry positions itself in an ambivalent relationship to the most radical dismantling of narrative and representation. Similarly, it occupies the same position with regard to the dismemberment of the poetic texts that Dada figures such as Raoul ■ Hausmann were producing at that same moment in Berlin as they foregrounded the grapheme over the phoneme, exclusively making the poem the subject of a totally nonlexical structure.

Schwitters's declaration from the outset that he had no political ambitions whatever, that he wanted his work to be situated within the tradition of painting, that his goals were utterly aesthetic and aimed at a new plastic formal order, set him at a further remove from Berlin Dada. Remaining in Hanover, with brief interruptions, and developing his own project, Schwitters soon became the center of a separate avant-garde scene, with friends and collaborators forming around him. The museum director Alexander Dorner, especially, became a crucial organizer and curator in bringing international avant-garde activities to the provincial city.

Schwitters and Lissitzky in collaboration

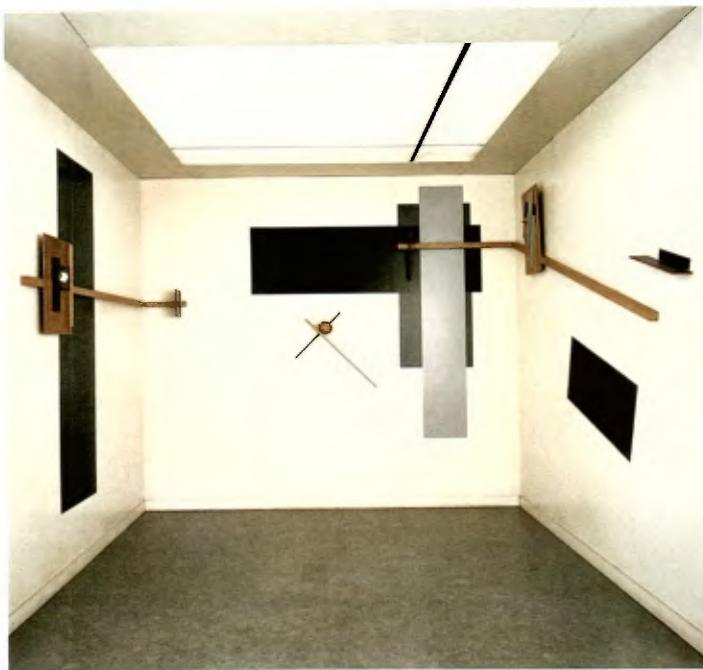
In 1925, Dorner invited the Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky to return to Germany to produce a major installation for the Landesgalerie Hannover (Lissitzky had studied architecture and engineering in Darmstadt from 1909 to 1914 and had stayed in Germany for long periods in the early twenties while collaborating on a number of projects). Schwitters first came into contact with Lissitzky and Russian Constructivism and Productivism in 1922, and the two artists became friends and collaborators. In 1923 Schwitters invited ■ Lissitzky to become the designer and coeditor of issue 8/9 of his magazine *Merz* [2], published in April 1924 and called "Nasci" ("being born" or "becoming"), which was an explicitly programmatic alliance of Constructivist and Dadaist ideals. While in historical hindsight it seems unlikely that these two models would have provided the basis of fruitful exchange, it is precisely in the collaboration between Lissitzky and Schwitters at the moment of 1926 that the productivity of such an encounter can be most adequately traced.



2 • El Lissitzky, cover design for Kurt Schwitters's *Merz*, no. 8/9, April–July 1924

By then both artists had been increasingly transforming their projects from pictorial or sculptural work into the investigation of architectural space. In his *Proun Room* for the Great Berlin Art Exhibition of 1923, for example, Lissitzky had transformed his ideas into three-dimensional form for the first time, designing the walls and ceilings with geometric shapes and reliefs [3]. An additional element was Dorner's intensifying attempt to theorize the new forms of display, the redesign of traditional museum spaces in favor of an adequate representation and display of avant-garde practices in painting and sculpture. Lissitzky had already designed a space for the 1926 International Exhibition in Dresden in which to show international, avant-garde, abstract art. For his first model, he rigorously emphasized walls on which the works would be hung by installing vertical wooden battens, spaced equidistant all across the display surfaces and painted white, gray, and black, and by placing the paintings on those surfaces. Ironically, the eventual master design of the 1926 Dresden exhibition was placed in the hands of the reactionary German architect Heinrich Tessenow, who would soon become known for his staunch advocacy of the return of architecture to an antimodernist regionalism.

It was Lissitzky's preliminary design for Dresden that made Dorner decide to invite the Russian to Hanover, and it was there that Lissitzky produced a second version of the cabinet for the display of abstract art, called the *Demonstration Room* [4]. During

3 • El Lissitzky, *Proun Room*, 1923 (1965 reconstruction)

3,000 × 300 × 260 (118 1/2 × 118 1/8 × 102 1/8)

this extended stay in Hanover, Schwitters and Lissitzky further developed their friendship. Schwitters had by now also moved away from painting and collage to his own first architectural project, which came to be known as the *Merzbau* [5]. Beginning in his studio on the ground floor of his own private house, he gradually transformed all aspects of the traditional cubic space of the domestic room into an increasingly distorted, multiperspectival spatial structure, installing wooden, painted reliefs and loading various objects and additional forms into the spaces created.

The opposition between the *Merzbau* and the *Demonstration Room* and the close bond between their two authors produce one of the most puzzling moments of mid-twenties German avant-garde history. Yet one bridge that links the two is their focus on the issue of tactility and bodily experience in relation to the work of art. For Lissitzky's project to accommodate avant-garde painting and sculpture within the museum now focused primarily on Dorner's call for a new participatory mode of reading and perceiving. Dorner's project was to reconceive the museum as a space of author/object/spectator collaboration mediated through an increased experience of tactility. In the installation that Lissitzky designed, with its emphasis on drawers and cabinets and shelves that the spectator could open and move, thereby being directly involved in the repositioning of him- or herself as a spectator or in the positioning of the object in a new relationship, tactility and tangibility were clearly elements of a radically altered mode of perceptual interaction, changing the contemplative space of the museum into an archive.

But what Dorner's vision had not anticipated was the specific contribution that Lissitzky was to introduce into the design of the *Demonstration Room*. The transformation of the exhibition space and its display devices and conventions led him to articulate the actual historical transformation of the institution of the museum,

4 • El Lissitzky, *The Abstract Cabinet: Demonstration Room* in the Landesgalerie, Hanover, 1927–8 (1935 installation view)

as well as the actual status of the object displayed within it. The new situation moved the art work, that is, from being an object of cultic origins to one of pure exhibition-value, from being an object of transhistorical intelligibility to one of historical specificity, of the kind necessary to archival purposes. Those ideas about the need to transform the museum in terms of its functions, its audience, and its institutional definition had emerged in the Soviet Union as early as 1919, when artists discussed the reorientation of the aesthetic object from cult to exhibition and the transformation of viewing spaces from ones of ritual to ones of archival dimensions.

Apart from this shared interest in tactility, however, Schwitters's *Merzbau* inverted every single aspect of Lissitzky's approach, which we could call the rationalist transformation of the last residual ritualistic element in the display and reading of the work of art. In contrast, the *Merzbau*'s space was reconceived as specifically ritualistic, with the object and its display welded into an almost Wagnerian drive toward the condition of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which all the senses, all perceptual elements, would be unified in an overall intensified form of visual, cognitive, and somatic—that is, physical—interaction with the objects, structures, and materials on display. Schwitters's attempt to construct a grotto, or a *Bau*, carried all the connotations that word has in German: from an animal burrow (the original ▲ meaning of *Bau*) to the famous Bauhaus declaration in which the medieval guilds of community and communality building cathedrals

in a preindustrial society and the structure of the collective could be invoked. These sources came together in his perpetual insertions into the overall display of objects, textures, and materials that emphasize the somatic dimension of perception. Thus he brought the solicited residues of bodily secretions into the building (bottles of urine, for instance, or snippets of friends' hair), which he stored and inserted into the various layers of the structure. He thereby fabricated a manifestly nonrational, nonarchival, noninstitutional space, in which a certain regression into the totality of an unconscious architectural space was conceived, and called it *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*.

Two extremes of avant-garde design

Schwitters's *Merzbau* and Lissitzky's *Demonstration Room* could therefore be theorized as the two extreme opposites of the possibilities of avant-garde design in the twenties. Clearly, compared with the ideology of the Bauhaus, neither Schwitters nor Lissitzky belongs to the utopianism of a Bauhaus spirit that was attempting at the same moment to transform everyday life and domestic architecture through a mode of rationalization and a form of democratized consumption. Specifically in the *Merzbau*, which would be continued throughout Schwitters's life (after the *Merzbau* in Hanover was destroyed by Allied bombing in 1943, Schwitters installed a second version in Norway, to where he had emigrated in 1937 after his work ▲ had appeared in the "Degenerate 'Art'" exhibition in Munich, and a third—the *Merzbarn*—near Ambleside in northern England, just before his death in 1948), the idea of a space of radical rationalization was refused on every single level. This project of instrumentalizing or rationalizing space was intended to reach right down to the most intimate sphere of everyday life, where function reigned supreme, as daily activities were submitted to planning, control, and the principle of greater efficiency. In the light of this, Schwitters's *Merzbau* proposed a space of total inefficiency, utter dysfunction, a complete refusal to subject spatial experience to rationality, transparency, and instrumentalization. By emphasizing the space as the ground, the grotto, and a home of a different kind, Schwitters created a secularized but at the same time ritualized space of bodily function, one of bodily retrieval outside and in opposition to a rigorously controlled public sphere.

Despite its appearance, Lissitzky's space is also dramatically different from the functional realm of Bauhaus design, specifically because of its theoretical accommodation of the radically transformed conditions of perception of the work of art. That is, Lissitzky's space is in a sense a program for the retheorization of the institution of the museum. If it has been misread as a dynamic display of abstract, avant-garde art, to which it supposedly lends support through its streamlined design, that false interpretation should be counteracted by emphasizing the degree to which Lissitzky saw the museum as being increasingly transformed into the mere institution of historicization and archival order. Thus, inasmuch as Lissitzky recognized that the cognitive and perceptual modes still embedded in easel painting were no longer to be rescued or redeemed by even the most advanced forms of abstraction, he had already subjected the avant-garde



5 • Kurt Schwitters, *The Hanover Merzbau: The Merz Column*, 1923
Mixed media, dimensions unknown (destroyed)

promise of abstraction to an internal critique. Looking at the display of the specimens of abstraction in the *Demonstration Room*, one can—with hindsight of course—recognize that even in the way these objects are displayed there is already a certain critical operation taking place. This is because Lissitzky's reliefs—wall structures, cabinets, drawers, movable panels—become the ultimate work of art, while the abstract paintings, in all their radicality, become mere illustrations of an aesthetic that had already been superseded. BB

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Henning Rischbieter (ed.), *Die Zwanziger Jahre in Hannover* (Hannover: Kunsthalle Hannover, 1962)

After working as a commercial artist in Brussels, René Magritte joins the Surrealist movement in Paris, where his art plays on the idioms of advertising and the ambiguities of language and representation.

1920–1929 While still in Brussels, René Magritte (1898–1967) operated a studio specializing in commercial art from a garage behind his house; thereafter in Paris he often turned to book design and advertising work to support himself. For some critics, his deadpan representational style was always distressingly close to that of commercial art, but his experience in this field might also account for his abiding interest in the relation between figurative and verbal forms of representation, and the interaction—often the interference—between these ways of evoking an object or suggesting an idea. It might also explain his later willingness to issue the most important of his paintings in multiple copies. His most famous painting, *The Treachery of Images* [1], in which the picture of a pipe is captioned “This is not a pipe” (“Ceci n'est pas une pipe”), was issued at least five times, once as a large sign. Another, *Dominion of Light* (1952), in which a darkened house illuminated by streetlamps stands in a night landscape but is seen against a daytime sky, was reproduced in sixteen oil and seven gouache versions (the first in 1949, the last in 1964). In 1965 he would plagiarize his own *The Great Family* (1963)—an image in which the silhouette of an object (in this case, a bird; in *The Seducer*, a ship) is “fleshed out” by the substance of its milieu (here, clouds; there, waves)—to produce *Skybird* for Sabena Airlines, with the understanding that it would be used for publicity campaigns.

The potential complementarity of fine and commercial arts depended on the nature of mass culture. Stimulated by advertising, desire for a commodity became a craving less for a unique object than for one of many copies. As Walter Benjamin argued in ▲ “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), such desire aims to extract a sense of equivalence “even from a unique object by way of reproduction.” Sucking the very idea of uniqueness and distance (or what Benjamin called “aura”) out of lived experience, the culture of the commodity prepares simultaneously for the seductions of media imagery and the spectacle of an artist pirating his own work.

Everything in the Surrealist position, however, would seem to shun the prefabricated and the mass-produced. Everything would seem to be geared, instead, to the unrepeatable moment of shock in which the most banal object of everyday life would be reinfused with wonder and revelatory power—what André Breton called

“the marvelous” and theorized as “objective chance.” As Surrealist artists lent themselves to jewelry design, department-store display, and Hollywood set design during the thirties and after the war, the commercialization of the movement struck a postwar generation of artists as a travesty of the Surrealist mission to transform reality in order to create a revolutionary consciousness. In 1962, on the occasion of Magritte’s retrospective at Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium, Marcel Mariën (1920–93), a second-generation Belgian Surrealist and editor of *Naked Lips*, circulated a leaflet to the magazine’s subscribers titled “Big Reductions” and fraudulently signed “Magritte.” At the top of the sheet a Belgian banknote was reproduced with Magritte’s head montaged over that of King Leopold I. Below, Magritte is made to complain that his paintings are being used for sordid speculation, being bought like land, fur coats, or jewels. “I have decided to put an end to this shameful exploitation of mystery,” the text goes on, “by bringing it within reach of every purse. Below will be found the necessary details [a mail-order form] which, I hope, will bring rich and poor together at the feet of genuine mystery. (The frame is not included in the price.)”

Repetition compulsion

It is possible to argue, however, that Magritte’s fascination with and practice of the multiple was not a function of a slackening of his Surrealist “purity.” Many of his earliest paintings are internally composed through recourse to the multiple. His 1928 portrait of Paul Nougé (1895–1967) doubles a single image of the Belgian poet, while *The Murderous Sky* [2] suspends the same bloody corpse of a bird four times against the background of a rocky cliff. Indeed, it could be said that what allows one to identify Magritte as a Surrealist is the sense that a form of doubling grips his work from the very start, infusing it with a version of just that Surrealist ▲ practice of the double that was connected to the Freudian concept of the uncanny and the compulsion to repeat.

Freud had identified the feeling of uncanniness as a sense of the return of something archaic, and had analyzed the accompanying anxiety as related to the death drive’s compulsion to repeat; the uncanny could thus be said to be a kind of eruption of the nonliving in the midst of life: a return of the living dead. It is this



Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

Magritte

1 • René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, 1929

Oil on canvas, 60 × 81 (23½ × 31½)

character that suffuses Magrittean imagery such as the whole series related to *The Human Condition* [3], in which the painting shows a landscape against which is superimposed a painting of the same landscape, the edges of the nested representation nearly fusing with what must now be recognized as the “merely” representational status of the master image, formerly understood as transparently real. Thus the dead double (the representation) erupts among the living reality to threaten its solidity, to suck out its substance, like the vampires that return by means of mirrors.

Within the context of Surrealism, Roger Caillois had offered an alternative example for the spookiness of the living dead. With the case of animal mimicry, in which a dizzying perspective is offered by the praying mantis of death imitating life imitating death, there ▲ opens a vertiginous hall of mirrors that would come to be identified during the sixties with the term *simulacrum*. Like the dead animal “playing dead,” the simulacrum offers a case of resemblance in which a crucial internal thread between similar things is cut: “life” in the example of the mantis; “the absence of sin” in the instance of post-Fall humanity (man was originally made in the

image of God; after the Fall he no longer resembles Him). In the two examples just given, however, there is an ultimate court of appeal that will allow one to distinguish the living insect from its dead copy or the innocent from the sinner. The ultimate simulacral state, however, is where there is no way to differentiate copy from original, dead from living. This is a state of multiples *without originals*. Michel Foucault would invoke that state at the very end of “Ceci n'est pas une pipe,” his 1968 essay on Magritte and the simulacra: “A day will come when, by means of similitude relayed indefinitely along the length of a series, the image itself, along with the name it bears, will lose its identity. Campbell, Campbell, Campbell, Campbell [a reference to Andy Warhol’s soup cans].”

It was during the very period of the early sixties, when Magritte was appearing to his fellow artists in Belgium to have sold out to the enemy, that Foucault was developing a theory of literature positively based on the idea of the simulacrum (although in a way unrelated to Surrealism). One example of this work, his book *Death and the Labyrinth* (1963) dealing with the writer Raymond Roussel, was known to Magritte, himself interested in Roussel’s



2 • René Magritte, *The Murderous Sky*, 1927

Oil on canvas, 73 × 100 (28½ × 39)

procedures for draining the meaning out of words (like the dead sucking life out of the living). In 1966 Magritte's attention was also drawn to Foucault's recently published *The Order of Things*, the title of which coincided with the name of Magritte's own current exhibition. He and Foucault exchanged letters during 1966; Foucault's interest led him in 1968 to address Magritte's work directly.

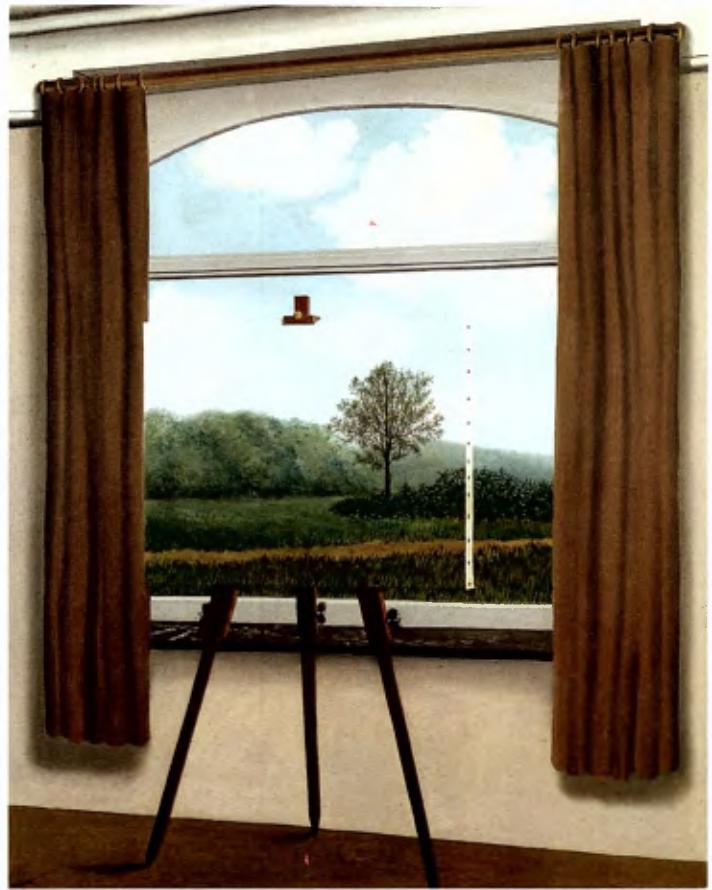
Using Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* as his essay's object lesson, Foucault's analysis turned on (what in French is called) "the object-lesson" itself. This is the grammar-school session in which, say, a teacher draws a picture on the blackboard and underneath it writes its name. Such a combination of picture and name Foucault calls a *lieu commun*, a "commonplace," or in the literal sense of the page, a "common ground," referring to the convention we experience from our very first A.B.C. book ("A is for apple; B is for baby; C is for ...") through to textbook explanations, dictionary entries, or scientific manuals of all kinds. It is a convention in which the channel of white space separating the domain of the illustration from the realm of the text in fact binds them together with all the powerful glue of what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein would sometimes call a "language game" and at other times "a form of life."

The power of this convention is first that the fact of representation disappears within the object-lesson. Thus Foucault writes: "No matter that it is the material deposit, on a sheet of paper or a blackboard, of a little graphite or a thin dust of chalk. It does not 'aim' like an arrow or a pointer toward a particular [object] in the

distance or elsewhere. It is [that object]." Second, the relationship encoded in the picture-caption couple is that of truth—between the image (as copy) and the model in the world to which it is transparent; for this reason, "the commonplace" serves as the basis for knowledge: "It is there," Foucault writes, referring to the channel linking image and caption, "on these few millimeters of white, the calm sand of the page, that are established all the relations of designation, nomination, description, classification."

Apparently challenging the banality of the commonplace, the modernist tradition of "the calligram" is only, Foucault argues, ▲ a covert attempt to reinforce it. When Guillaume Apollinaire writes a poem about rain in vertical lines of type that imitate rain, he assumes that he has collapsed the two-part structure of the commonplace into a higher order of synthesis in which *rain* (the word) disappears into its object made newly present on the page. Commenting that this transparency is futile, since to read the poem we have to disregard the image it forms, and to see the image we have to ignore the words, Foucault argues that the problematic of the calligram nonetheless serves as Magritte's point of departure, since what is happening in *The Treachery of Images* is a form of "unraveled calligram."

The work is calligrammatic in that the substance of the writing—"this is not a pipe"—and that of the image are so manifestly a matter of the same laborious hand (here the banality of Magritte's style of rendering serves this outcome). But this



3 • René Magritte, *The Human Condition*, 1933

Oil on canvas, 100 x 81 (39 1/8 x 31 1/8)

calligram is unraveled because it ironically undoes both the tautological urgency of the picture-poem and the truth content of the object-lesson at one and the same time. Such undoing turns on the operation of the *this* in the work, which functions in at least three ways at once, finally producing a confusion that aborts its operation completely. Does *this* in "This is not a pipe" point to the word "pipe" and thus the nonresemblance between word and picture? Does it point to itself, the word *this*, and thus the nonresemblance between this form of language and representation? Does it point to the object-lesson as a whole, and thus the nonresemblance between it and the real-world model to which it is supposed to be transparent? All of these nonresemblances being true, what falls apart within this ironic maneuver is the "truth" that language tries to encode in what it takes to be the primal force of the indexical aspect of language crystallized in the term *this*.

Returning to the channel of white that binds object and caption, Foucault concludes that if "the calligram absorbed that interstice," Magritte's calligram-against-the-grain reopens "the trap the calligram had sprung on the thing it described. But in the act, the object itself escaped.... The trap shattered on emptiness: image and text fall each to its own side, of their own weight. No longer do they have a *common ground*." And if the object (the real-world model) disappears from the place of knowledge, as the guarantee of its truth-value lying behind it but always transparent to it, what is left is the simulacral condition, a world of multiples without originals.

The unraveled museum

Developing as a young poet in the forties within the orbit of Magritte and other Belgian Surrealists such as Paul Nougé, as well as Marcel Mariën and Christian Dotremont, Marcel Broodthaers initially shared the ambivalence toward Magritte expressed in "Big Reductions." But in the course of establishing his "Musée d'Art Moderne" after 1968, Broodthaers began to draw close to the idea of a simulacral operation of language, and Magritte, mediated by Foucault's text, became strategically important to him. Thus in "The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present," the exhibition his "Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles" mounted in 1972 in Düsseldorf, he displayed hundreds of objects each accompanied by a label stating "This is not a work of art." Explaining this caption by saying that "This is not a work of art" is a formula obtained by the contraction of a concept by Marcel Duchamp and an antithetical concept by Magritte, Broodthaers reproduced Duchamp's *Fountain* and Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* in the exhibition catalogue on facing pages and advised the reader to read Foucault's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe."

One way of understanding such a "contraction" is first, to see the object-lesson performed by Duchamp's readymade as pointing to the entire institutional context in which the work of art occurs, since it is that context that folds onto the ordinary object—urinal, curry comb, hat rack—to confer artistic status on it; and second, to feel the way that lesson is confounded by the multiple arrows of Magritte's "unraveled calligram"—pointing now to the label itself (as not being a work of art), now to the objects on display, many of which, like stuffed eagles or corks with eagles printed on them, are nonaesthetic in status (and thus not works of art), and now to the whole of the exhibition in its condition as "fictitious." For if Duchamp had wanted to expose the institution of the museum as conventional, Broodthaers is now displaying it as simulacral. RK

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Constantin Brancusi produces a stainless-steel cast of *The Newborn*: his sculpture unleashes a battle between models of high art and industrial production, brought to a head in the US trial over his *Bird in Space*.

During the four weeks in 1907 when Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) was one of the fifty assistants working for France's most famous sculptor, Auguste Rodin, he would have been exposed to two, antithetical phenomena. First, as one of a contingent of "pointers"—operators of caliper-like devices used to transfer a sculptural idea from its plaster model to the marble block (often to make enlargements or reductions)—he would have seen the travesty of the aesthetic "original" wrought by a kind of assembly-line production. Second, as the talented graduate hired by Rodin fresh from the École des Beaux-Arts, he would have experienced the other side of the master's practice in which, as though by magic, Rodin caught the most ephemeral gestures of a troupe of Balinese dancers weaving before him, suggesting the delicacy of their movements out of simple rolls of clay.

This latter output, the very opposite of the former, contained the quintessence of what Walter Benjamin would call "aura," namely the uniqueness of something captured at a particular moment and in a particular place, this never-to-be-repeated quality resonating in the uniqueness of the medium, itself the result of a personalized touch. Relating this aura back to art's earliest sources in religious ritual, Benjamin pointed to the necessity that the cult object be an original in order to work its effect, for which substitutes or copies would be powerless. Secularization did nothing to diminish this importance of the aura-filled, aesthetic original, and from the Renaissance to Romanticism an ever higher premium was paid not only for the originality of a given artist's conception but also for the sense that the line or brush-stroke that delivered that idea was inimitable. Rodin's dancers, caught on the wing in a pinch of clay that bears the imprint of the master, could be said to be the supreme example of this desire. His marbles and bronzes in multiple copies, on the other hand, point instead to the type of art industry—with its traffic in replicas—that characterizes the decorative, rather than the fine, arts.

The birth of the world

Fleeing Rodin's studio after just one month, Brancusi adopted an approach to sculpture that could be said to be the exact opposite of this industrialization. For on the wood or stone he was able to salvage (being too poor then to buy his materials), he began to work without



1 • Constantin Brancusi, *Prometheus*, 1911
Marble, 13.8 x 17.8 x 13.7 (5 1/8 x 7 x 5 1/8)

the intermediary of the clay or plaster model, carving directly into the block instead. The aesthetic honesty of such "direct carving" operates on two levels. First, it responds to the specific nature of the material in which it is fashioned, involving none of the transfers from modeled clay to stone or plaster and bronze through which traditional sculpture was conceived. Second, the immediacy of this response resists replication, ruling out the production of the multiple.

The ethos of direct carving brought other associations, all of which were welcomed by Brancusi, who began increasingly to affect the bearing of a Romanian peasant, wearing a long beard, worker's smock, and sandals. The rural wood-carving traditions of his native land were a reinforcement to his antiestablishment position, supporting as they did the influence of African and other primitive sculpture evident in his work by 1914. That in succumbing to such an influence he was merely following the rest of the Parisian avant-garde, first in its enthusiasm for Paul Gauguin (who had initiated ▲ direct carving within this milieu) and then for a wider primitivism, was something Brancusi did not like to admit, so adamant was he

that he stood outside the historical drive of modernism, so focused was he on the presumed timelessness and universality of his work.

Indeed it is this search for the historically unmediated that seems to underlie the course of Brancusi's art as it pursued forms of increasing simplification and purity. The trajectory of a single idea, as it moves from a realistic child's torso, its head bent in a caress of shoulder and cheek (*The Suppliant II*, 1907), to the suddenly isolated head as simplified oval lying on its side (*Head of a Sleeping Child*, 1908), to a sphere whose teardroplike appendage produces neck and shoulder with breathtaking economy and barely breaks the spherical surface with a whisper of the facial features [1], to an egglke form creased longitudinally and beveled at one end [2] to suggest at one and the same time the ovum and its moment of splitting into multiple cells, to a prone, entirely featureless ovoid, demonstrates this rage for reduction. Many of Brancusi's admirers saw this as a kind of Platonism, as when Ezra Pound wrote an early appreciation of the works as the "master-keys to the world of form," typically viewing Brancusi's sculptural gift as a genius for releasing the eidetic form—the pure "idea"—from the physical matter of the initial block.

The high finishes that Brancusi applied to his works, beginning with the bronze version of *Prometheus* in 1911, in which meticulous (and arduous) hand polishing brings the surface to a mirrorlike shine, only reinforce this sense of perfection. Thus, when a polished bronze version of *Sculpture for the Blind*, now

titled *The Beginning of the World* [3], is set on an equally polished steel plate, the facing mirror surfaces concentrate the effect of the encapsulation of the "idea" behind its glittering surface.

The same finish was applied to Brancusi's *Bird in Space*, first rendered in sleek marble in 1923 and then in highly polished bronze in 1924 (to be repeated in bronze in 1927 [4], 1931, and 1941). This sculpture, delicately elongated and plumelike, is part bird's body, part outstretched wing, and part vision of the effortless rise into flight. In its condensation of gesture it seems to hark back to that aspect of Rodin's work that had not compromised its aura: those matchless dancers that had emanated from his fingers.

With this mention of Rodin, however, something quite contrary enters the discussion of Brancusi. For, like the master, this rustic "peasant" needed his own band of assistants to rub the marbles and bronzes into a perfect state of polish and, like Rodin, he was in the habit of issuing many of his pieces in small "editions"; furthermore, these gleaming objects with their slightly Africanized shapes and their mixture of svelte metallic contours and crenellated wooden bases, could easily slip over into a family resemblance with ▲ the most fashionable of decorative idioms, namely Art Deco, the twenties marriage of chrome and stainless steel, ebony and zebra skin, primitivism and industrialization. Far from being timeless and universal, Brancusi's work thus participates in the entirely historical phenomenon of stylistic change and, more "degradingly,"



2 • Constantin Brancusi, *The Newborn II*, 1927

Stainless steel $17.2 \times 24.5 \times 17$ ($6\frac{3}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$)



3 • Constantin Brancusi, *The Beginning of the World*, 1924

Bronze, $17.8 \times 28.5 \times 17.6$ ($7 \times 11\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{1}{2}$)

in the revolving door of style known as fashion—a version of the “art industry” even more compromised than Rodin’s.

Nothing could betray this connection more directly than the commission Brancusi undertook for the Vicomte de Noailles, who wanted a large version of the *Bird in Space* for the garden of his opulent country house. Designed by the fashionable architect Robert Mallet-Stevens, the 1923 mansion is pure Art Deco, a mixture of concrete, glass, and chrome; Brancusi’s 150-feet-tall sculpture, it was decided, should be executed in stainless steel. Jean Prouvé, an architect who had pioneered in this medium, took charge of the project, and the two men embarked on a trial cast of *The Newborn* [2] before attempting the monumental version of the other work.

The result of their trial is pure paradox: part platonic solid, part ball bearing. On the surface there is no difference between this 1927 cast and the 1923 bronze, except one is “silver” and the other is “gold.” But that is just the point. By allowing his “idea” to be submitted to industrialization—by using a material developed for mass production, one whose gleam has nothing to do with aura and everything to do with multiplicity—Brancusi produced a retroactive critique of his own aesthetic posture. Not only are his surfaces compromised by being twinned with high-end decoration, but his deep involvement with serialization is itself a version of industrial method. As he set the restricted number of his themes on their paths toward ever greater formal reduction, he was working serially. And then, once his repertory of forms had been established (by 1923), he repeated these over and over, with minor variations, until his death in 1957.

At the same time as Brancusi was working with Prouvé, a commotion was stirring the art world on the other side of the Atlantic.

▲ When Edward Steichen tried to bring his recently purchased version of *Bird in Space* into New York for a large retrospective of Brancusi’s work, US Customs officials classed the sculpture as a kitchen utensil, and thus as mass-produced, unoriginal, ready made, and requiring the payment of import duty, rather than as a work of art, which would have been duty free. Their decision was repeated a few weeks later when Marcel Duchamp entered the Port of New York with the large Brancusi he owned. Numerous protests, in which powerful American art collectors weighed in, were to no avail. The headline “Brancusi’s Art Is Not Art, Federal Customs Men Rule” made front-page news in January 1927. It was not until these patrons, armed with prominent lawyers and art experts, took the case to trial in October 1927 that the decision was overturned, the courts admitting that something had changed in art to make Brancusi’s work eligible for duty-free status. Accordingly, the judgment read:

There has been developing a so-called new school of art, whose exponents attempt to portray abstract ideas rather than to imitate natural objects.... The object is made of harmonious and symmetrical lines and while some difficulty might be encountered in associating it with a bird, it is nevertheless pleasing to look at and highly ornamental, and as we hold under the evidence that it is the original production of a professional sculptor ... we sustain the protest and find that it is entitled to free entry.



4 • Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*, 1927

Bronze, height 184.1 (72 1/2), circumference 44.8 (17 5/8)

Buying the arguments of the critics, collectors, and museum directors ranged on its behalf, the judge accepted the idea that Brancusi’s work was redeemed by its abstraction and its formal purity. The philistines working in the Customs Office were thereby seen as beneath contempt. Yet history often has exquisite jokes up its sleeve, one of them being the strange relationship between this Romanian “peasant” purist and the father of the readymade. Brancusi first met Duchamp in Fernand Léger’s presence, so the story goes, at an aeronautics fair in Paris in 1912. Marveling at a propeller on display, Duchamp asked his new friend if he could do any better. His own conviction that no

artist could lead him the following year to present *Bicycle Wheel* as the first readymade, while Brancusi's response, it could be argued, was not only the *Bird in Space*—part propeller, part Mallarméan suggestion—but the whole ambivalence of his work's development, one aspect of which the men at Customs unerringly grasped.

The links between Duchamp and Brancusi do not stop at this peculiar double helix in which the industrial readymade crosses with a notion of “art” as inviolate concept. The two are also connected via a shared ambiguity between pure and impure at the level of carnality, since Duchamp's marriage between the industrially impersonal and ▲ the erotic—his *Fountain*, *Female Fig Leaf*, the entire scenario of the *Large Glass*, etc.—is echoed in Brancusi's mystic union between the abstract and the libidinal. Nowhere is this more obvious than in *Princesse X* [5], which was censored from the 1920 Salon des Indépendants on the grounds of obscenity, the purity of the artist's reduction of female torso to the double ovoids of the breasts connected by the curving tube of the neck to the ovoid of the head being redescribed—by Picasso, among others—as simply phallic. Although Brancusi protested any such connection, he continued to photograph the work from the angle that underscored this association. And indeed the kinds of reductions to which he submitted the human body seemed inevitably to participate in the logic of the part object, in which the whole body, in being metonymically rendered by a purified fragment, increasingly takes on the character of a sexual organ. This is particularly true of Brancusi's series of elegantly simplified male torsos (1917–24), which come to be suspended between a phallic representation and the “elbow” of a plumbing connection.

It is possible to take this opening onto the sexual and to recode it in terms of an iconography of the self-creating (male) body. Here it becomes important that what is male in Brancusi's *Torso* is its overall phallic shape, since the lithe body itself, without a penis, is to all intents and purposes female. This bi-gendering, so prominent in *Princesse X*, is read by such an interpretive strategy as a fantasy of male primacy involving the circumvention of the female body in a dream of omnipotent self-regeneration, a regeneration that can then be carried into the whole of Brancusi's work, with the *Bird in Space* now seen as a version of the immortal phoenix, and the *Newborns* as a way of bypassing the female in an act of parthenogenesis.

This strategy marries the eroticism of Brancusi's sculpture with the modernist drive toward autonomy, so that biological self-creation becomes the “unconscious” analogue for the formal desire to make an object that is self-contained. This, however, is to cut the eroticism of Brancusi's sculptures off from the industrial logic that functions as their (very different) “unconscious.” A final story of Brancusi's connection to Duchamp makes clear the strange workings of this logic.

The story begins with the 1924 death of John Quinn, one of Brancusi's most enthusiastic American collectors. To save Brancusi's prices from the catastrophe of having many works dumped on the market at one time, Duchamp stepped in and, with the novelist Henri-Pierre Roché, bought the twenty-nine pieces in Quinn's collection at the fire-sale price of \$8,500 for the lot. If Duchamp had stopped making art for sale in the early twenties, he had nonetheless

now acquired a huge body of work by another artist, from the sale of which he was able to live. Brancusi was thus a participant in Duchamp's playing at every role within the institutional structure of art, from artist to critic to museum director to publisher and now to dealer. In 1933 when asked if he thought painters should be less professional, Duchamp replied that they should be more so, but that among dealers a bit of amateurishness would be welcome. It was Duchamp who was the perfect amateur “dealer” with just one artist in his stable; and Brancusi was, apparently, perfectly content with this situation: the unconscious of art presented as pure commerce. RK

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1920–1929



5 • Constantin Brancusi, *Princesse X*, 1915–16

Polished bronze, 61.7 × 40.5 × 22.2 (24 1/4 × 16 × 8 3/4)

Charles Sheeler is commissioned by Ford to document its new River Rouge plant: North American modernists develop a lyrical relation to the machine age, which Georgia O'Keeffe extends to the natural world.

When in *The Bridge* (1930) the American poet Hart Crane (1899–1932) saluted the Brooklyn Bridge as “harp and altar” on which to celebrate a new “myth to God,” his encomium harked back to the ecstatic vision of his hero, nineteenth-century poet Walt Whitman. But for avant-gardists in New York the celebration of this feat of engineering, already under way in Cubist and Cubo-Futurist renderings of the bridge by John Marin (1870–1953) and Joseph Stella (1877–1946), might also have recalled the ironic defense made by Marcel Duchamp after his urinal ▲ *Fountain* was rejected by the Society of Independent Artists in 1917: that America’s two greatest contributions to civilization were its plumbing and its bridges. This was as much compliment as insult. • Even as Dadaists like Duchamp and Francis Picabia used the machine sarcastically, in a manner opposite to the lyrical exaltations of Crane, Stella, and other North American machine-age artists, they also believed that such icons of modernity as industrial machines, suspension bridges, and skyscrapers made the United States “the country of the art of the future” (Duchamp) and New York “the futurist, the cubist city.” And these are indeed the icons, extended to the factory and the city, that became the staples of North American machine-age art. So when Morton Schamberg (1881–1918) titled a cluster of pipe joints *God* (1916), some in his milieu may have taken it less as a Dadaist satire on the religion of art than as a modern fetish of American practicality not unworthy of a little worship.

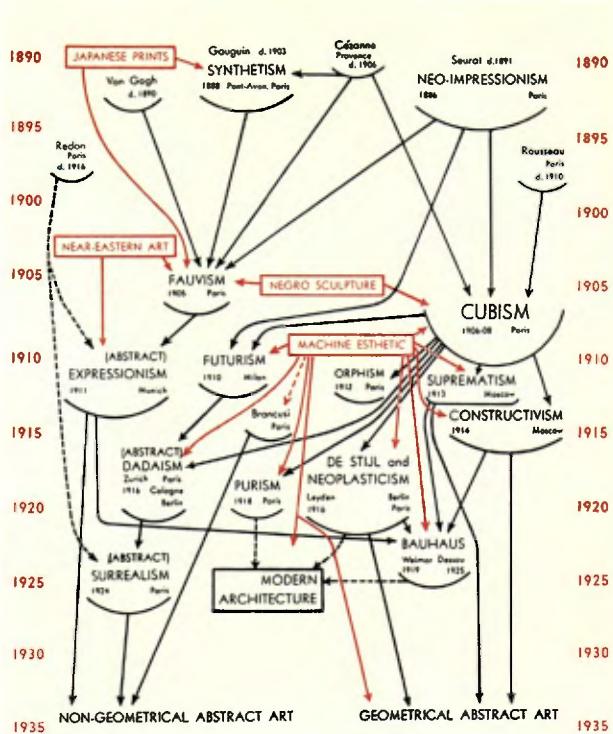
The machine as modernist shrine

The United States might have possessed the prized icons of modernity, but its artists lacked the privileged styles of modernism. As a result they felt at once benighted and belated in relation to European modernists, a condition that complicated the transatlantic travel of artists in the teens and twenties. (The ocean-liner, celebrated by ■ Le Corbusier as a model of functional design in his famous manifesto *Vers une architecture* [1923] and detailed by Charles Demuth [1883–1935] in *Paquebot “Paris”* [1921–2] and Charles Sheeler [1883–1965] in *Upper Deck* [1929], was the vehicle of this passage.) Discontent with the messy realism of their elder compatriots, some American artists voyaged to Europe to seek out modernist art, while others had already seen such work in New York at the controversial



1 • Marsden Hartley, *The Iron Cross*, 1915
Oil on canvas, 121 × 121 (47½ × 47½)

Armory Show in 1913 or in the various exhibitions at the 291 Gallery, ▲ run by Alfred Stieglitz, and the de Zayas and Modern galleries, run by Marius de Zayas. Indeed, the North American encounter with modernism occurred mostly in the States, where Duchamp, Picabia, and others had fled during World War I. At the time New York was the interim capital of the avant-garde, which gravitated to two salons above all: one around Stieglitz (which Picabia favored), the other • around the collectors Walter and Louise Arensberg (where Duchamp met Man Ray, the American who was soon to be central to both Dada and Surrealism). In these settings Americans like Marin, Stella, Arthur Dove, and Marsden Hartley (1877–1943), who had already adapted different modernist idioms [1], mixed with Europeans involved in Dada. And this milieu provided the contradictory mix that artists like Demuth and Sheeler attempted to resolve: a diagrammatic draftsmanship validated by Dada but stripped of its irony, and a lyrical semiabstraction developed in different ways by Dove, Hartley, Marin, and Stella. To this combination was



MoMA and Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

On November 7, 1929, only days after the Stock Market crash, the Museum of Modern Art opened a show of Postimpressionist masters (Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin) in six small rooms at 730 5th Avenue in New York. The brainchild of three collectors, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (wife of John D. Jr.), Lillie P. Bliss (sister of the Secretary of the Interior), and Mary Quinn Sullivan, MoMA was inaugurated in the same period as the Whitney Museum of American Art (begun by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1931), The Museum of Non-Objective Painting (the first incarnation of the Guggenheim Museum, opened by Solomon R. Guggenheim and Baroness Hilla Rebay von Ehrenweisen in 1939), and the Barnes Foundation (established by Albert C. Barnes near Philadelphia in 1922, though not opened to the public in his lifetime)—all cultural projects of rich Americans inspired in part by the 1913 Armory Show and such early advocates of modernist art as Alfred Stieglitz and Walter Arensberg. With A. Conger Goodyear as chairman of the board, the Modern pledged to exhibit “the great modern masters—American and European—from Cézanne to the present day” and “to establish a permanent public museum” of such work. (An agenda of design and education was also urged on the fledgling institution by the regents of the State University of New York.)

A persistent paradox of advanced art in the United States is located right here: its very reception often occurred within museum settings, and in this sense it was often already institutional. On the other hand, the museological field of

modern art was brand new, so much so that MoMA turned to a twenty-seven-year old professor of art from Wellesley College named Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (1902–81) as director. Barr had taught the first course on twentieth-century art in the United States in 1927; in the winter of 1927–8 in Europe he encountered such radical experiments in art, architecture, and design as De Stijl in Holland, Constructivism in the Soviet Union, and the Bauhaus in Germany. Barr seems to have absorbed and rejected these models in almost equal measure. He proposed a broad framework for MoMA with departments not only of painting and sculpture, prints and drawings, but also of commercial art, industrial art, design, film, and photography (which were more widely exhibited than many at the museum might think today). However, the trustees scaled this plan back on the grounds that it would confuse the public, and Barr seems to have acquiesced in large part.

A similar compromise was reached regarding exhibition display. Barr did away with the traditional decorative grouping of cluttered art works, but he was not nearly as experimental as El Lissitzky and others in Europe. Instead he practiced a well-spaced positioning of objects arranged by subject and style on open walls and floors. The effect was to create an aesthetic dimension that appeared both autonomous and historical: the works were “isolated,” in his own words, with “no effort ... made to suggest a period atmosphere”; at the same time they suggested an “almost perfect chronological sequence.” For Barr style was the principal medium of meaning in modern art, and influence was its main motor. He was likely guided here by his Princeton professor, Charles Rufus Morey, who used a similar evolutionary scheme to narrate medieval art, but Barr made this system effectual for twentieth-century art in a way that was widely adopted by other institutions.

The first epitome of this MoMA museology was the 1936 show “Cubism and Abstract Art.” On the one hand, Barr introduced a vast range of European avant-garde practices to an American audience—photographs, constructions, architectural models, posters, film stills, and furniture as well as paintings and sculptures. On the other hand, the signature element of the exhibition was the cover image of its scholarly catalogue, which consisted of a flowchart of the many avant-gardes first channeled into a few mainstream movements—Surrealism, Purism, Neoplasticism, Bauhaus, Constructivism—then further reduced to “Non-Geometrical Abstract Art” and “Geometrical Abstract Art.”

By 1939, when MoMA moved to a new building on 53rd Street, it had begun to establish a proprietary right over these movements, and its history of style-influence was soon interpreted as a projection of future artmaking as well. Although the initial plan was to transfer or to sell works as they aged to other institutions, MoMA decided to keep its acquisitions, and in 1958 it opened a permanent installation of its collection. Barr was relieved of the directorship of the museum in 1943, but he retained a research position, and in 1947 he was reinstated as head of collections, in which position he remained until his retirement in 1967.

2 • Joseph Stella, *New York Interpreted: The Voice of the City*, 1920–2

Oil and tempera on canvas, four panels 224.8 × 137.2 (88½ × 54), central panel 252.1 × 137.2 (99¼ × 54)

added a photographic criterion of precision stipulated by Stieglitz ▲ and exemplified by Paul Strand. In fact, several of these young Americans, who came to be called “Precisionists,” worked as photographers as well, and Sheeler collaborated with Strand on a short filmic celebration of New York called *Manahatta* in 1919.

Stylistically, Joseph Stella was more Cubo-Futurist than Precisionist, but no account of machine-age art can omit such works as his *New York Interpreted: The Voice of the City* [2], a painting of five panels, each over seven feet high, that evokes the city through massive scale, nighttime luster, and linear force. Here Stella conceives New York as a circuit of movement, with each panel devoted to a site of transportation. The two panels on the left are “The Port (The Harbor, The Battery)” and “The White Way I” (the great avenues of Manhattan as a modern Milky Way); on the right are “The White Way II” (a specific ode to Broadway) and “The Bridge” (as in Brooklyn Bridge, his favorite motif); and in the center, slightly higher than the other panels, is “The Skyscrapers (The Prow),” which evokes the island of Manhattan as a ship’s prow, a mobile vessel of light in a sea of night. This is a pictorial version of the poetic trope of personification, used to excess by Hart Crane, in which a thing is addressed as a person. As the Expressionist Franz Marc had ● done with nature, Stella uses a Cubo-Futurist line to vitalize the city—to give it a “voice,” to render it more than human. Like Crane, Stella saw New York as an “apotheosis” of “the new civilization,” with the bridge as its “shrine,” and his painting is a kind of modern altarpiece in which the city appears as a cathedral, with its skyscrapers, bridges, and avenues as so many columns, vaults, and naves.

■ In the Bauhaus, the machine was opposed to the Church; in *The Biography of Henry Adams* (1900), Adams contrasted the dynamo to the Virgin as emblems of very different epochs. Here, however, such opposites are fused. This is the wager that machine-age art makes: that a spiritual (or at least lyrical) subjectivity can be achieved not in opposition to the machine or the city (as the Expressionists had thought) but by means of them. This American image of the metrop-

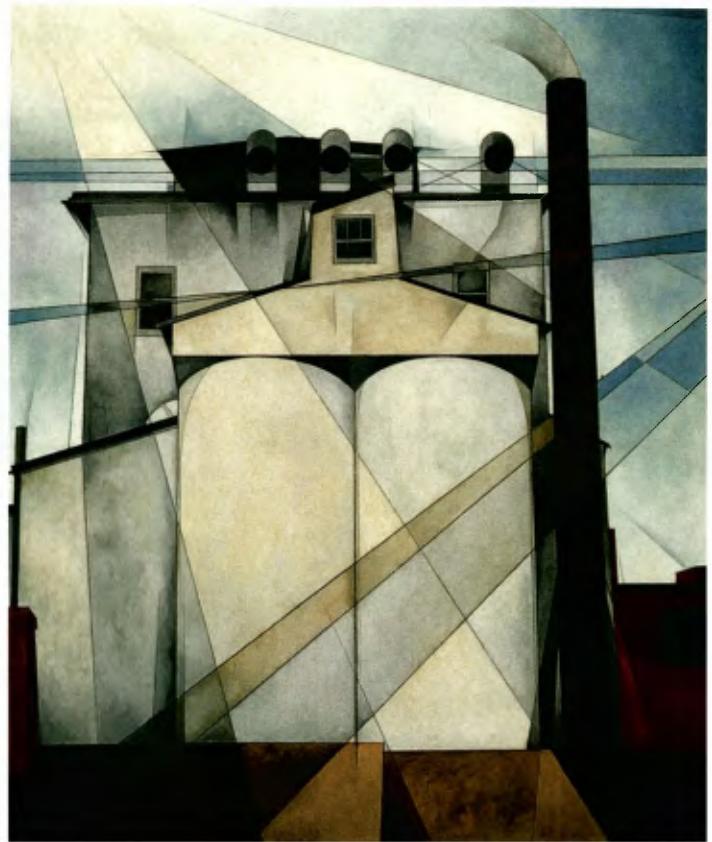
olis diverges from the European account of the German sociologist Georg Simmel, for whom urban shocks are parried by a “blase” subject. Like Crane, Stella urges a “gusto” embrace of the city instead. But this embrace, which, again like Crane, Stella saw in sexual as well as religious terms, was impossible to sustain, as the overwrought nature of both *The Bridge* and *New York Interpreted* might suggest.

The task of the modern poet, Crane once wrote, is “to acclimatize” the machine—an ambiguous formulation that points to a persistent problem of machine-age art. Does it “technologize” traditional forms (as *The Bridge* does to the epic, or *New York Interpreted* does to the altarpiece), or does it “traditionalize” technological developments through such forms, which are thereby updated? At the 1912 Salon de la locomotion aérienne in Paris, Duchamp remarked to ▲ Brancusi: “Painting is over. Who’d do better than this propeller? Tell me, could you do that?” The Precisionists attempted to do so through a monumental style that combined a precision associated with photography with an abstraction derived from Cubism—ingredients that chastened and transformed one another. For example, the “Cubism” of Demuth and Sheeler is not “analytical” in the sense that the object is not fragmented. On the contrary, the planar projections of the ship vents in *Upper Deck* by Sheeler and the grain elevators in *My Egypt* by Demuth [3] solidify the object, simplify its structure, and define its contour, and so clarify rather than complicate our vision. At the same time, these images are hardly photographic. Forms are reduced and spaces flattened, shadows emboldened and tonalities transformed—more so in Demuth, who is more lyrical than Sheeler. Architecture, then, is not only a prime motif of this art; it also influenced its way of seeing. *Upper Deck*, Sheeler once remarked, was painted “much as the architect completes his plans before the work,” with a thorough study of structure and a clear presentation of perspective.

On this matter of architecture the European-American exchange became deliriously circular. With its bridges and factories, industrial America was not just a giant readymade for Dadaists like Duchamp

and Picabia; it was also a polemical model of functional design for ▲ modernist architects like Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier. In the 1913 *Deutscher Werkbund Yearbook* Gropius published seven pages of photographs of American factories and grain elevators, one of which Le Corbusier retouched (to remove its nonmodernist details) in his Purist journal *L'Esprit Nouveau* in 1919 and again in *Vers une architecture*. Neither designer had visited the United States, but they needed this "Concrete Atlantis," as the architectural historian Reyner Banham called it, for its "factories and grain elevators were an available iconography, a language of forms, whereby promises could be made, adherence to the modernist credo could be asserted, and the way pointed to some kind of technological utopia." How better to argue for a functionalist architecture than to point to its "primitive" preexistence in utilitarian structures in the States? In this European allegory, industrial America was not only futuristic but also almost prehistoric. It was sometimes associated, through black culture, with • exotic Africa, especially in France, where Le Corbusier participated in a "techno-primitive" cult of jazz, dancing, and boxing, and sometimes with ancient Egypt, especially in Germany, where Gropius made the connection to America via monumental architecture (for instance, the grain elevators as modern pyramids). The art historian Wilhelm Worringer pointed to this Egyptian association implicitly ■ in *Abstraction and Empathy* in 1908, which Gropius knew in 1913, and explicitly in *Egyptian Art* in 1927, which borrowed an American illustration from Gropius. This association was also adopted in the same year by Demuth in *My Egypt*, an exemplary Precisionist painting of grain elevators in his native town of Lancaster, Pennsylvania (other Precisionists like Ralston Crawford [1906–78] painted the elevators in Buffalo favored by Gropius et al.). The title *My Egypt* might seem ironic, but the elevators are imaged proudly, viewed from below with geometric masses raked by precise spotlights. It is as if Demuth wanted to claim that these elevators are also monuments for the ages, even to suggest another myth of modernity, not one of mobility (as with so many other modernists) but one of monumentality. Yet there is a catch to this myth. For Worringer, ancient Egypt represented an "artistic will" to abstraction that expressed an anxious withdrawal from a chaotic world, and he saw a similar anxiety behind modernist abstraction. Might the monumentality of Precisionist work point to a related ambivalence about a machinic world so dynamic as to be disintegrative, to a related turn to compositions of stasis and stability, as if in defense against modern chaos? As Strand once remarked, "spiritual control over the machine" was the primary struggle of this generation of artists.

The Precisionists represented modern icons, but were these artists modernist? They never broached pure abstraction; on the contrary, they used its simplifications to represent the world all the more precisely. It was for this reason that Precisionism was sometimes called "Cubist Realism." "It was Sheeler," de Zayas remarked, perhaps with Strand also in mind, "who proved that Cubism exists in nature and that photography can record it," and that painting based on photography, as often with Sheeler, might do so as well. This return to clarity and stability, this reconciliation of representation



3 • Charles Demuth, *My Egypt*, 1927

Oil on board, 90.8 × 76.2 (35½ × 30)

and abstraction, aligns Precisionism with the mostly antimodernist ▲ "return to order" in much European art of the twenties. In fact it has more in common with the style known as Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) in Germany of the same time, yet without its critique of the military-industrial complex that produced World War I. Indeed, Precisionism was gung ho about capitalist modernity even after the Stock Market crash of 1929, and this aligns it more closely still with another ambiguous movement, the Purism of Le Corbusier and Amedée Ozenfant. This style also sought to rationalize art and to classicize the machine—to aestheticize not only machined products but a mechanistic way of seeing as well, which is to say that the Purists also valued the "precisionism" of mass production. ■ In this regard both movements were poles apart from Russian Constructivism, for rather than transform art vis-à-vis industry, they worked to recoup industry as an image for art. Precisionism also resisted the aesthetic implications of mechanical reproduction, for rather than transform painting vis-à-vis photography, it worked to assimilate photography into painting—to use its apparent transparency to the object in order to render painting as immediate, as illusionistic, as possible. (The Precisionists were also called "the Immaculates"—immaculate as in "immaculate conception," pure, without stain.) Whereas other modernists foregrounded the medium of painting, Sheeler admitted "his effort ... to eliminate the interception of the medium between the eyes of the spectator and the creation of the artist," to "set forth [the object] with the utmost clarity by means of craftsmanship so adequate as to be unobtrusive."

1920–1929



4 • Charles Sheeler,
American Landscape, 1931
Oil on canvas, 61 × 78.7 (24 × 31)

5 • Stuart Davis,
House and Street, 1931
Oil on canvas, 66 × 107.3 (26 × 42 1/4)



The epitome of this “capitalist illusionism” is the work done by Sheeler for the Ford Motor Company. By the mid-twenties Ford had outgrown its Highland Park factory where the Model T was assembled, so River Rouge was built ten miles from Detroit in order to produce the Model A. The largest industrial complex in the world, with twenty-three buildings, ninety-three miles of track, 53,000 machines, and 75,000 employees, it was a site of total automobile production, from the smelting of steel to the painting of cars. In 1927 Sheeler was commissioned to photograph the new factory. In six weeks he completed thirty-two official photographs, nine of which were published in magazines. (*Vanity Fair* printed one, *Criss-Crossed Conveyors*, with the caption “By Their Works Ye Shall Know Them,” and referred to River Rouge as “an American altar of the God-Objective of Mass Production.”) Sheeler showed some photographs as art works and used others for paintings, in which very few workers appear, and no drudgery, let alone exploitation, is shown. In short, he identified artistic perspective with technocratic surveillance, and he reconciled landscape composition with Taylorist and Fordist principles of work-management. In his compositions the fragmentation and reification of work and worker alike, which the Marxist critic György Lukács defined in 1923 as the prime effects of assembly-line production, are magically smoothed over. Sheeler even titled a few panoramas of River Rouge *Classic Landscape*, as if the plant were an idyll, and he continued to produce such paintings well into the worst years of the Depression.

The climax of this work is *American Landscape* [4], where landscape is remapped as industrial production, America as the rationalization of labor, and nature as the transporting and processing of raw materials into Model As. In the foreground, at the start of production, is a vacant ladder, sign of the obsolescence of preindustrial man (the sole worker is a tiny figure on the tracks in the middle ground). In the background, at the end of production, stands a stack where smoke mixes with clouds. Here the world culminates in a factory, where it is a question no longer of the invasive machine in the “Edenic garden of America” (in the phrase of historian Leo Marx) but of the machine *as* this garden. This is the ideological effect of such machine-age art: it represents capitalist industry, but only to obscure its exploitation of labor behind an “occult mechanism”—a monumental structure, a beautiful image (this particular painting was purchased by a member of the Rockefeller family). Such art spiritualizes, monumentalizes, and naturalizes a historical moment as a “machine age”: New York as glorious cathedral, grain elevators as Egyptian pyramids, a factory as a classical landscape.

Some artists did not subscribe to this monumentalist agenda. Although Stuart Davis (1894–1964) also evoked the urban life of the machine age, he did so through symbols of consumption rather than through icons of production. In a colorful style derived from ▲ Synthetic Cubism Davis painted the city as a street poster of jazzy rhythms, surfaces, and signs [5]. But he did so in a way that reclaims collage for painting and is neither disruptive of high art nor critical of mass culture. In effect, Davis displaced the machine, only to highlight the commodity in an artistic solution that foreshadows Pop art.



6 • Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black Iris III*, 1926

Oil on canvas, 91.4 x 75.9 (36 x 29 1/2)

It was left to Georgia O'Keeffe to salvage the lyrical subjectivity that some artists hoped to wrest from the machine age, but in order to do so she abandoned images of production and consumption altogether. After a decade of intermittent paintings of New York, she turned away from the city, and eventually rediscovered, in the desert landscape of the American Southwest, a relation to objects and images that reassured rather than overwhelmed the body [6]. A male fantasy of self-creation—of men “born without a mother” (Picabia)—hovers over machine-age art from the mechanomorphic portraits of the Dadaists to the production pastorals of the Precisionists. With her abstracted flowers and landscapes, O'Keeffe, an artist who appears without progenitors, recaptures self-creation for her own art of nature and troubles the male gendering of this fantasy as well. In doing so, she charts an alternative identity for American artists, especially for women, one that departs from the machine age and its myths of modernity. HF

FURTHER READING

Reyner Banham. *A Concrete Atlantis: U.S. Industrial Building and European Modern Architecture 1900–1925* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986)

Leo Marx. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964)

Terry Smith. *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993)

Gail Stavitsky et al. *Precisionism in America: 1915–1941* (Montclair, N.J.: Montclair Art Museum, 1994)

Karen Tsujimoto. *Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography* (Seattle: San Francisco Museum of Art / University of Washington Press, 1982)

Anne M. Wagner. *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

The publication of "Unism in Painting" by Wladyslaw Stzreminski, followed in 1931 by a book on sculpture he coauthored with Katarzyna Kobro, *The Composition of Space*, marks the apogee of the internationalization of Constructivism.

The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End": such is the title of the editorial launching the first issue of *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, a short-lived trilingual "international journal of modern art" published in 1922 by two members of the Russian avant-garde living in Berlin at the time: the Constructivist artist ▲ El Lissitzky and the writer Ilya Ehrenburg (1891–1967). The end of the blockade imposed by Western nations at the outbreak of the October Revolution of 1917 was still only a wish when the manifesto was penned (*Veshch'*s inaugural double issue is dated March–April), but this wish was granted a few weeks later. On April 16, 1922, angering most other Western countries forced to swallow its diplomatic coup and, sooner or later, to follow suit, Germany signed the Treaty of Rapallo, recognizing the Soviet government in Moscow. Neither El Lissitzky nor Ehrenburg was a political pundit, but no particular expertise was needed to sense that the wall of isolation behind which Soviet Russia had been kept ever since 1917 was about to topple and that Germany, the great loser of World War I, would be the first country to lend a hand to this pariah of the international community.

Russians in Berlin

Unlike Ehrenburg, who had traveled throughout Europe for a few months (allegedly to study) before settling in Berlin in the fall of 1921, Lissitzky arrived there straight from Moscow via Warsaw on New Year's Eve, 1921. Ehrenburg was more of a fellow traveler than an ardent Bolshevik, whereas Lissitzky considered it his duty to propagate the new developments of Soviet art in the West. It has never been proven that the Russian artist had received an official mandate, but at the very least he had the tacit support of Anatoly Lunacharsky's Soviet ministry of culture and education (Narkompros, or People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) set up in 1917: he would be chosen to design the catalogue of the groundbreaking "Erste Russische Kunstausstellung" ("First Russian Art Exhibition") financed by the Soviet government and held at the van Diemen Galerie in October and November 1922 [1]. Both Ehrenburg and Lissitzky were immediately seduced by Berlin, then a formidable cultural and ideological melting-pot, vibrant with a multiplicity of pacifist and left-wing groups, some still hoping to revive the



1 • El Lissitzky, preliminary sketch for the cover of the catalogue of "Erste Russische Kunstausstellung," 1922
Tracing paper, gouache, Indian ink, graphite, 27 x 19 (10½ x 7½)

January 1919 uprising that had upset the city for a season before being brutally crushed with the assassinations of the Marxist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. In a matter of weeks the Russian artists established contacts with all the major players of the Berlin avant-garde, particularly with the highly politicized ▲ Berlin Dadaists but also with many artists from the countries artificially created by the Treaty of Versailles, which officialized the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the close of World War I.

But the largest group of immigrants was the Russians—and, contrary to what one might expect, relatively few of them were faithful to the deposed Czarist regime (those who were White Russians, as they were called, preferred Paris); many had been disenchanted by Lenin's politics or had fled the terrible famine and the civil war of 1918 to 1921, but they still hoped that one day they could go back to their country and contribute to its development.

There was perhaps no form of artistic production that piqued the curiosity of the cosmopolitan intelligentsia gathered in Berlin more than that of the Russian avant-garde. Communications with the rest of Europe had ceased at the beginning of 1914; although some information had begun to filter in from 1920 on (notably through the first book on the topic ever published in the West, *Neue Kunst in Russland 1914–1919* (New Art in Russia 1914–1919), written by the young, Vienna-based Soviet journalist Konstantin Umansky), and this had fueled the already vast interest in "the new Russian art."

The editors of *Veshch'* were fully aware that the timing was perfect, as the first paragraph of "The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End" testifies:

The appearance of Veshch' is another sign that the exchange of practical knowledge, realizations, and "objects" between young Russian and West European artists has begun. Seven years of separate existence have shown that the common ground of artistic aims and undertakings that exists in various countries is not simply an effect of change, a dogma, or a passing fashion, but an inevitable accompaniment of the maturing of humanity. Art is today international, though retaining all its local symptoms and particularity. The founders of the new artistic community are strengthening ties between Russia, in the aftermath of the mighty Revolution, and the West, in its wretched postwar Black Monday frame of mind; in so doing they are bypassing all artistic distinctions whether psychological, economic, or racial. Veshch' is the meeting point of two adjacent lines of communication.

The program that followed, forcefully laid out by Lissitzky in three parallel columns (one for each language: German, French, and Russian) punctuated by the repetition of the title of the journal in bold type, contained a condemnation of the "negative tactics of the Dadaists" (compared to those of the prewar Futurists) as well as ▲ those of the Russian Productivists:

We have nothing in common with those poets who propose in verse that verse should no longer be written, or with those painters who use painting as a means of propaganda for the abandonment of painting. Primitive utilitarianism is far from being our doctrine. Veshch' considers poetry, plastic form, theater as "objects" that cannot be dispensed with.

This did not mean that *Veshch'* was advocating a return to art for art's sake, continued the editors: for them, "every organized work—whether it be a house, a poem, or a picture—is an "object" directed toward a particular end, which is calculated not to turn people away from life, but to summon them to make their contri-

bution toward life's organization." Thus *Veshch'* vowed to "investigate examples of industrial products, new inventions, the language of everyday speech and the language of newspapers, the gesture of sports, etc.—in short, everything that is suitable as material for the conscious creative artist of our times." The key words were "organization" and "construction": contrary to what the Productivists believed, art would abdicate its ideological power if it was entirely subsumed into industrial production, but both art and industrial production could function as a model for each other. What the latter has to gain from this interrelation remains vague in the editorial, but according to its authors the recent developments of artistic production provide a clear lesson: its strength derives in great part from the fact that it is a collective enterprise and that each work is conceived according to a plan, following certain rules defined by the material, and not the mere result of subjective inspiration.

Although *Veshch'* played a major role in publicizing the art of the Russian avant-garde, it should be noted that most of the contributions appeared in Russian (a major exception is Lissitzky's long overall review of "exhibitions in Russia," illustrated by ▲ installation photograph of the 1921 Obmokhu show, published in German). The editors' dream was to act as an intermediary between East and West and in so doing give ammunition to their colleagues at home, who were already fearing that Lenin's New Economic Policy, drafted in 1921 and advocating the return of "bourgeois specialists," was going to seal their fate. To inform the Soviet avant-garde of projects similar to its own in various countries of Europe was to encourage its members to hold fast: they were not alone. Thus, among the mass of information printed in the first issue of *Veshch'* one reads an announcement for an international exhibition of "Progressive Art" to be held in Düsseldorf.

The editors of *Veshch'* took an active part in the "Congress of International Progressive Artists" that coincided with the Düsseldorf exhibition (May 29–31, 1922), during which they solidified • their link with the Dutch movement De Stijl as well as with other groups working on similar premises in countries such as Romania, Switzerland, Sweden, and Germany [2]. With Hans Richter (an ex-Dadaist turned Constructivist filmmaker) and Theo van Doesburg, the mastermind behind De Stijl (who had just published his manifesto on "Monumental art" in the first issue of *Veshch'*), Lissitzky formed the "International Faction of Constructivists." In a "minority" statement conceived as a direct counterproposal to the humanist creed of the Congress's resolution, the three coauthors protested against the lack of definition of the term "progressive artist": "We define the progressive artist as one who fights and rejects the tyranny of the subjective in art, as one whose work is not based on lyrical arbitrariness, as one who accepts the new principles of artistic creation—the systematization of the means of expression to produce results that are universally comprehensible." Furthermore, they lambasted the corporatist ideology that fueled the Congress's ambition to create what they saw as "an international trade for the exhibition of painting." Against such a



2 • El Lissitzky (fourth from right) and Theo van Doesburg (third from right) at the "Congress of International Progressive Artists" in Düsseldorf, 1922

"bourgeois colonial policy," they stated: "We reject the present conception of an exhibition: a warehouse stuffed with unrelated objects, all for sale. Today we stand between a society that does not need us and one that does not yet exist; the only purpose of exhibitions is to demonstrate what we wish to achieve (illustrated with plans, sketches, and models) or what we have already achieved." The definition of art that concludes this declaration confirms the constitution of a lingua franca of Constructivism: "Art is, in just the same way as science and technology, a method of organization which applies to the whole of life."

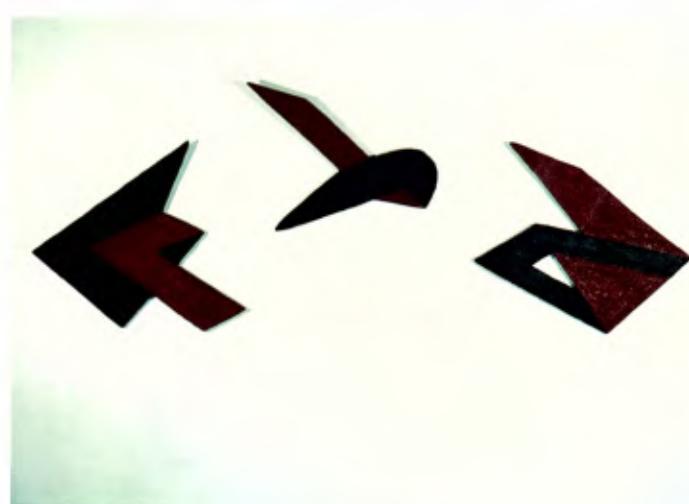
The "Erste Russische Kunstausstellung" at the van Diemen Galerie was not exactly a Constructivist exhibition—all trends of Russian art were represented, including the nascent "Socialist Realism"—but it provided the first occasion for an avid public to discover the prodigious activity of the Russian avant-garde in all media, from the Suprematist canvases of Malevich and his pupils to the theater design of Rodchenko's friends and the sculptures of Obmokhu, not to forget Lissitzky's own abstract paintings, which he called *prouns* (an acronym based on the Russian phrase "for the affirmation of the new"), and which made quite a sensation [4]. The exhibition was an immense success, with its Constructivist section receiving the lion's share of the press's attention. Lissitzky contributed in no small way to this triumph, taking an active part in all the public debates surrounding the exhibition and embarking on a lecture tour through several Dutch and German cities. His enthusiastic lecture on the "New Russian Art" still remains today one of the most lucid analyses of the development of the Russian avant-garde from 1910 to 1922.

The impact of the van Diemen show was immediate. Not only did commercial art galleries in Berlin (such as Der Sturm), till then clinging to Expressionism as a genuinely Germanic form of expression, rush to open their walls to the new avant-garde, but also there was the creation (or the conversion to Constructivism) of a myriad of avant-garde periodicals in Eastern European countries, all clearly indebted to the Russian model about which most of them were gathering information from correspondents in Berlin. Among many

others, these publications included *Zenit* in Zagreb (now in Croatia) and then Belgrade (now in Serbia), *Revue Devetsilu*, *Zivot*, and *Pasmo* in Prague, *Zwrotnica* and *Blok* in Warsaw, *Contemporanul* in Bucharest—not to speak of architectural journals such as *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung* (based in Berlin) and *ABC* (based in Basel), which Lissitzky helped launch. (A case in point was Lajos Kassák's *MA* [also the name of a group of artists and writers], which had begun its publication in 1916 in Budapest and moved to Vienna during the repression that followed the aborted Hungarian proletarian republic: as soon as László Moholy-Nagy, who left Vienna for Berlin in November 1919, became its editor there, *MA* turned into one of the most ardent advocates of the Constructivist position.)

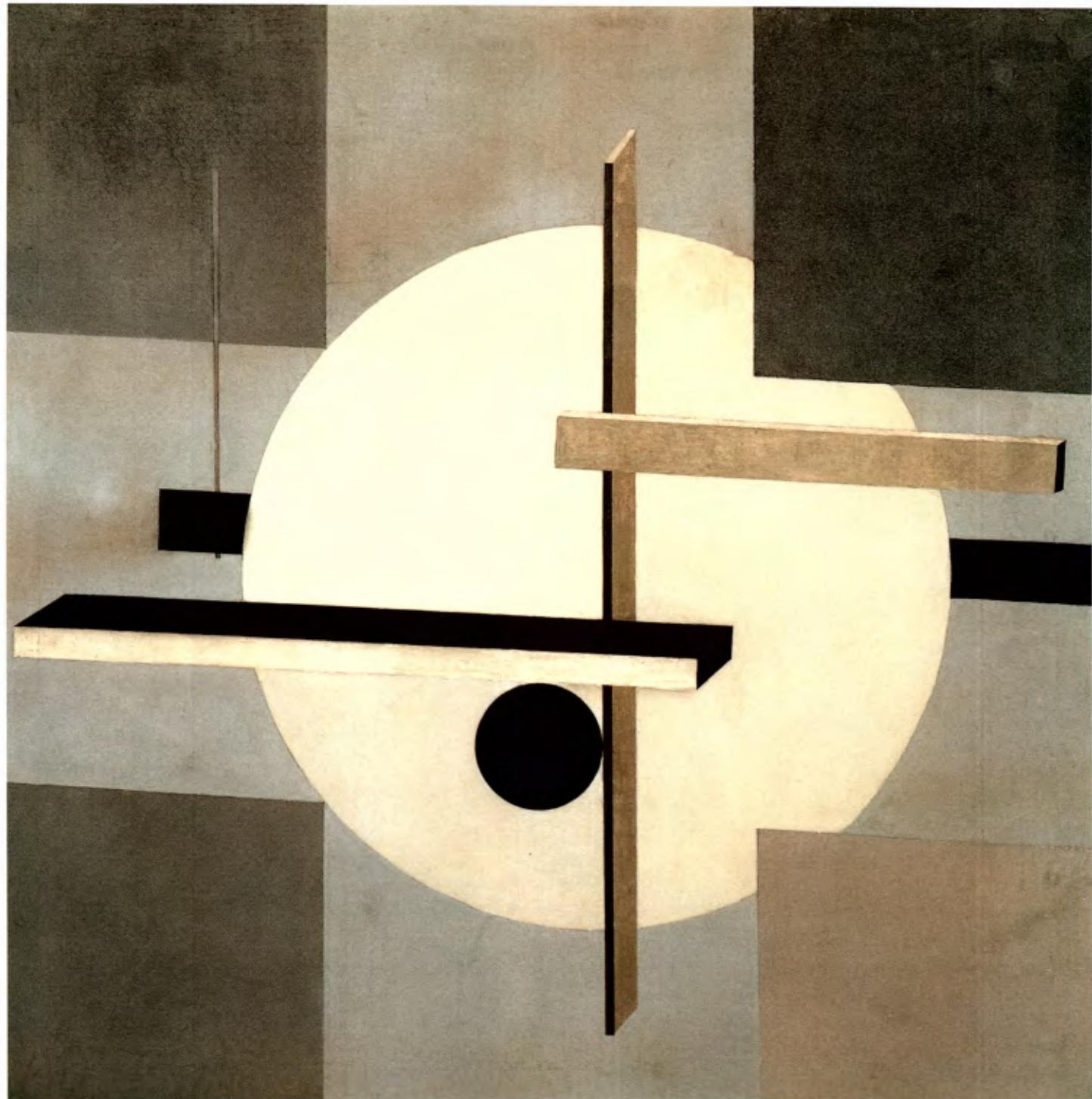
This is not to say that the artists grouped around these little magazines suddenly woke up from a long sleep when touched by the magic wand of Russian Constructivism—as a matter of fact, many had been trying for several years to revive an avant-garde culture that had been all but eliminated in their countries by the events of World War I—but for the most part their post-Cubist production lacked direction, which is exactly what their encounter with Russian art provided them with. Malevich's brilliant interpretation of Cubism had nourished a whole generation of Russian artists, even if they had come to reject his aesthetic position; without necessarily being aware of this, the young turks of this emerging "internationale" were fed a coherent narrative (from Cubism to Suprematism to Constructivism) that laid down the principles of action they most needed. Few of these new converts produced highly original works. A major exception is that of the Hungarian László Peri (1899–1967), whose paintings of various geometric shapes on shaped wood, canvas, or occasionally concrete slabs are particularly striking [3]. Another exception is constituted by the paintings of Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952) and the sculptures of his wife, Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951), a partnership that was the main force behind the Polish avant-garde of the twenties and early thirties.

To call Kobro and Strzemiński "new converts" would actually be misleading: firstly, born respectively in Moscow and Minsk



3 • László Peri, *Three-Part Space Construction*, 1923

Painted concrete, part 1: 60 x 68 (23⅓ x 26⅔); part 2: 55.5 x 70 (21⅓ x 27⅓); part 3: 58 x 68 (22⅓ x 26⅔)



4 • El Lissitzky, *Proun R.V.N.2*, 1923

Mixed media on canvas, 99 x 99 (39 x 39)

(Bielorussia, now Belarus), they had a direct knowledge of the Russian avant-garde, particularly of the art of Malevich with whom ▲ they had studied in the Svomas and later kept in close contact, often participating in artistic events held at Unovis, Malevich's school (where they most probably met Lissitzky); secondly, newly arrived in Poland in 1922, they did not share their fellow citizens' enthusiasm for the recent hardening of Constructivism into Productivism. The first major essay written by Strzemiński, "Notes on Russian Art," published in Kraków in 1922 shortly before

Lissitzky's lecture, should be read as its pendant. Offering a rigorous analysis of the art of Malevich, Strzemiński warns against any instrumentalization of art, a danger he sees as a major threat not only in the Productivist but already present in the Constructivist position. Adhering to the statement of the International Faction of Constructivists, according to which the work of art is an object whose construction has to obey a certain number of rules in order to evacuate the "tyranny of the subjective," he soon conceived of his task as that of articulating such rules.

By the end of the twenties, having rapidly ascended the ranks of the Polish avant-garde, Strzemiński proposed a full-blown theory, which he called Unism (published in 1928 as *Unizm w malarstwie* [Unism in Painting]) and which constitutes one of the most sophisticated discourses concerning abstract art. A brief summary of this theory is in order. In each medium, and differently in each medium, according to the theory of Unism, the artist must strive toward creating a “real” work of art (a work having a “real” existence, a work not relying upon any kind of transcendence). Any work of art whose formal configuration is not motivated by its physical condition (format, materials, and so on) is arbitrary, in the sense that the composition originates in an a priori vision conceived by the artist prior to its actual embodiment in matter, prior to the physical existence of the work. Such arbitrary compositions (which Strzemiński calls “baroque”) are always enacting a drama (thesis, antithesis) whose resolution (synthesis) must convince. (Strzemiński was remarkably aware of the fact that the pictorial ordering we call composition, first theorized during the Italian Renaissance, had been borrowed from the art of rhetoric.) But, he continues, any “baroque” synthesis is necessarily a false solution because the problem it solves is grounded in metaphysical oppositions that are artificially superimposed upon matter (the figure–ground opposition, for example) and are, therefore, not “real.” Any trace of dualism must be evacuated if one is to escape the idealism of composition so as to achieve a true construction (needless to say, Mondrian’s dialectics was rejected by Strzemiński).

Pictorial flatness, formal deduction from the frame, and abolition of the figure–ground opposition are thus the three main conditions of Unism in painting. As soon as a shape is not motivated by the format of the canvas, it floats, creating a figure–ground dualism and thus entering the realm of the “baroque” (even if Malevich was praised for his *Black Square*, most of his overtly dynamic compositions were severely criticized).

Understandably, Strzemiński had a hard time putting his extremist theory into practice. His wish to suppress all contrasts, formulated as early as 1924, should have given rise to a monochromatic type of ▲ painting; yet this did not occur until 1932 (more than ten years after Rodchenko’s *Red, Yellow, and Blue* triptych, and then for only a few canvases). But because he was keeping the monochrome at bay, Strzemiński had to find a means to “divide” the surface of his paintings, a means that would not be “arbitrary” and subjective. ● His invention, formulated in 1928—which would reappear in Frank Stella’s black paintings of 1959, though without any awareness of this historical precedent—was the “deductive structure,” to use the phrase coined by Michael Fried in 1965 with regard to Stella’s work: the proportions of all of the canvas’s formal divisions are determined by the ratio of its actual length and breadth.

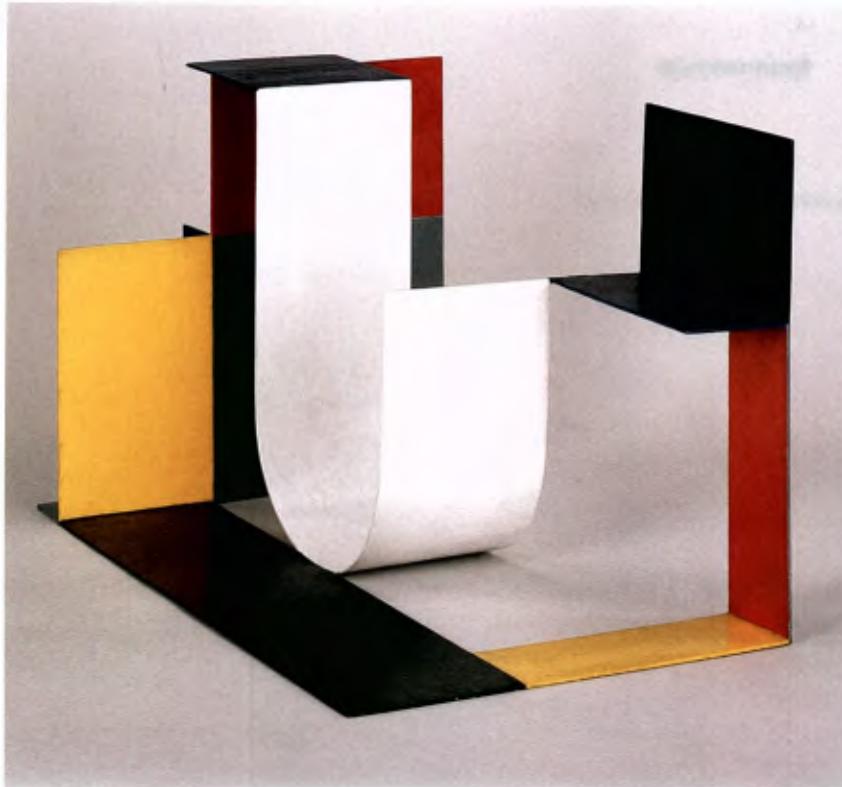
In the extraordinary series of paintings deriving from this principle, the surface is divided in two or three planes (whose colors were supposed to be of equal intensity) and the negative—



5 • Wladyslaw Strzemiński, *Architectonic Composition 9c*, c. 1929
Oil on canvas, 96 × 60 (37¾ × 23⅝)

positive articulation suspends the figure–ground hierarchy [5]. The division is indeed proportional to the format of the painting, but the occasional use of curves, which would seem impossible in a deductivist structure (within an orthogonal format), shows that Strzemiński had to mellow his program and reintroduce a certain dose of “arbitrariness” for the sake of variety. This would lead to a major crisis which only emerged, paradoxically, after he had attempted with Kobro’s help to transpose the theory of Unism into the domain of sculpture.

He began, faithful to the modernist notion of the specificity of each medium, by positing the radical difference between the pictorial and the sculptural object: the first has “natural limits” beyond which it cannot go (the actual dimensions of the canvas), the second does not have such luck and the “unity” it must establish is with the “totality of space.” To achieve this, the sculptural object must not stand out as a figure in an empty background (it cannot be a monument) but must incorporate space as one of its materials.



In order not to be “a foreign body in space,” it must “create the prolongation of space” that it materializes through its axes. Easier said than done—but Kobro was up to the task. The real inventiveness of Kobro’s works after 1925, all made of intersecting planes, orthogonal or curved, lies in the two methods she employed to prevent her sculptures from being perceived as figures in space or rather as figures separated from space—two methods based on what could be called an extreme syntactic disjunctiveness. The first method was polychromy: the harsh contrast of primary colors makes the sculpture explode in three dimensions, preventing it from becoming a unified silhouette because each side of each plane is painted differently. The second method involved the temporal perception of the sculpture as the viewer turns around it, Kobro being particularly careful to make sure that it would look utterly different from each successive point of view and that no elevation could be inferred from any other. The combination of these two disjunctive methods is remarkably efficient in the works Kobro produced from 1929 to 1930, such as *Spatial Composition #4* [6], which, similar in that sense to Strzemiński’s Unist canvases, could easily be misdated to 1960.

Strzemiński was rigorous enough to realize that, in positing the absence of any “natural limits” for the sculptural object, he had raised a major issue in his theory of painting. He asked himself: “If the division of the picture is determined by its dimensions, what then is the motivation of these particular dimensions?” The answer he provided created a vicious circle, while ignoring the Unist principle of the specificity of each medium: drawing from the “nature” of architecture, about which Strzemiński wrote that

“the homogeneous rhythm of its movement must be a function of the dimensions of man,” he established and proposed for every art a kind of ideal proportions (8 / 5). Demonstrating, despite himself, that it is impossible completely to eradicate the arbitrary in artistic production, Strzemiński reached back to a humanist ideal that Unism had precisely sought to destroy. The monochrome was his next way out, but by then the social metaphor that had been at the core of Strzemiński’s enterprise—his conception of the non-hierarchical, “homogeneous” pictorial object in which all parts are equal and interdependent as a model for the society to come—was wearing thin. Condemning artistic redundancy, Strzemiński preferred to abort Unism rather than repeat himself. The rise of Hitler in Germany and of Stalin in Russia were the last straws that silenced his utopian impulse. He spent the final twenty years of his life teaching, drawing biomorphic landscapes as a hobby. He died a year after Kobro, in 1952, without having renounced the principles of Unism but with the full knowledge that they were just as idealist as anything against which he had struggled. YAB

FURTHER READING

- Stephen Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971)
- Yve-Alain Bois, “Strzemiński and Kobro: In Search of Motivation.” *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990)
- El Lissitzky, “New Russian Art,” in Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968)
- Krisztina Passuth, *Les avant-gardes de l’Europe centrale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988)
- Ryszard Stanisławski, *Constructivism in Poland* (Essen: Folkwang Museum; and Otterlo: Kröller-Müller Museum, 1973)
- Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Garde and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987)

The publication of *Die neue Typographie* by Jan Tschichold confirms the impact of the Soviet avant-garde's production on book design and advertising in capitalist Western European countries, and ratifies the emergence of an international style.

1920-1929 ▲ When Jan Tschichold's (1902–74) *Die neue Typographie* (The New Typography) appeared in June 1928, published by the very official press of the German printing trade union, its reception was far less dramatic than expected (though the book sold very well and was quickly out of print). Far less, in any case, than that of its immediate antecedent, the special issue of the journal *Typographische Mitteilungen* published on the same topic and by the same organ only three years earlier, which had generated much debate in the journal. Entitled *elementare typographie* and edited by the young Tschichold (then aged twenty-three), this special issue rocked the traditional world of German book design, in which he had been trained, by introducing it to the typographical works and theories of El Lissitzky and László Moholy-Nagy, and to a host of illustrations by Kurt Schwitters, Herbert Bayer, Max Burchartz, and other members of the "International Constructivist" avant-garde, not to mention Tschichold's own virulent manifesto and his introduction seeking to place the new trend he was advocating into historical context. That was in 1925, just as the Bauhaus was relocating to Dessau, but things were then going very fast in Weimar Germany. Reading *Die neue Typographie* in 1928, without foresight of the fate of the "new typography" in Nazi Germany just a few years later (it would be denounced as "degenerate"), one could easily imagine that Tschichold had won his battle.

The book, in itself, is an extraordinary achievement, and one would have a hard time finding its equivalent in other artistic fields. Copiously illustrated, designed according to the very "laws" it posits, it proposes at once a historical account of the birth of new typography, a defense and illustration of its essential principles (with a claim to their universality that, in effect, contradicts their historical grounding), and a do-it-yourself manual. To illustrate the very specific rules that Tschichold establishes for the design of logos, business letterheads, envelopes (with or without windows), postcards, business cards, posters, newspapers, illustrated magazines, books, and many other items, each treated in a separate section and in excruciating detail, the book opposes many examples of good and bad modern layouts, on the grounds that "merely to copy the external shapes of the new typography would be to create a new formalism as bad as the old." The strategy is not

entirely new (a decade earlier Theo van Doesburg had used it in his journal *De Stijl*, where he opposed a jazzy grid composition by Vilmos Huszár to a lifeless "uncomposed" grid of the same size), but Tschichold is relentless. He even provides several makeovers of traditional or ersatz-modern designs (a poster for the continuing education classes offered by the city of Munich, an advertisement for a local newspaper), the "before" and "after" versions neatly juxtaposed in sharp contrast.

In fact, one could arguably say that nothing was entirely new in *Die neue Typographie*. That is, it is an extremely lucid synthesis, well organized and well argued, of principles that had been put forward and acted upon, from around 1922, by all the artists Tschichold had already singled out in *elementare typographie*. He is scrupulously honest about his debt, quoting several manifestos preceding his own, amply illustrating the work of his peers, and even discreetly managing, without ruffling feathers, to restore some credit where credit is due, notably when reattributing to Man Ray the invention of the "photogram" (abstract cameraless photography) that Moholy-Nagy had claimed to himself, a "theft" that permanently damaged the Hungarian artist's relationship with El Lissitzky.

In order to summarize the axioms of the "new typography" laid down by Tschichold, a little history is in order, following his own procedure: after a brief introduction that is a typical modernist paean to the machine age, including a quasi-mandatory belief in the social progress this age will bring to a collective humanity, the first three chapters of *Die neue Typographie* are devoted to a historical account. "The old typography (1440–1914)" is dealt with first, followed by a chapter on "the new art," and, finally, by a detailed chronicle of the advent of the "new typography" proper.

As to be expected, the "old typography" is very severely treated, with a particular hostility toward the historicism of what Tschichold disdainfully labels the "book-artists" of the nineteenth century, who took advantage of the new technical advances of lithography, photography, and photolithography to clutter their designs with a profusion of ornaments. The movements reacting against this abundant production are briefly described—namely ▲ William Morris's Arts and Craft, the *Jugendstil*, and even the renewed, simplified Biedermeier that came out of their ashes—but each are discarded as ill-suited to the modern world. Morris is



1 • F. T. Marinetti, page from *Les Mots en liberté futuriste*, 1919

ridiculed for his unequivocal rejection of the machine; the *Jugendstil* is criticized for its naive fascination for natural motifs and its indifference to the materiality of the typographic medium upon which it imposed these motifs; and the neo-Biedermeier style, praised for its self-restraint (particularly that of Peter Behrens, the architect in whose office Walter Gropius apprenticed), is condemned for its allegiance to the age-old precept of symmetry. However, both *Jugendstil* and neo-Biedermeier are commended for their adoption of roman characters instead of the Fraktur alphabet, commonly used in Germany since the Renaissance but almost illegible for any non-native German speaker. Cleverly, furtively, Tschichold has laid out the grounds for principles he would articulate later in the book (in favor of mechanization; against the *a priori* imposition of any form—floral letter-design, symmetry—onto the medium of typographic design; against nationalism).

The narrative of modernism given in the chapter on “the new art” is by now fairly banal—from Manet and Cézanne to abstract art and the photography of the twenties (about which Tschichold would design a book he coauthored with Franz Roh the following year). For the time, however, it was remarkably well-informed, especially in its treatment of Dada and of Russian Constructivism. Even more informative, as expected, is the chapter devoted to the “new typography.” With characteristic aplomb, Tschichold credits the Italian poet F. T. Marinetti, the founder of Futurism, “for providing the curtain-raiser for the change-over from ornamental to functional typography.” Quoting at length Marinetti’s 1913 typographic manifesto included in his celebrated book *Les Mots en liberté futuriste* of 1919 [1], Tschichold reproduces one of its plates famously conceived like a musical score, albeit a nonlinear one, the

size and orientation of the letters giving indication to the volume and pitch a voice is to obtain when reading the poem out loud: “For the first time typography here becomes a functional expression of its content.” Curiously, Tschichold refrains from criticizing Marinetti’s pictorialism (especially the representational function of the printed character when it pretends to be the graphic transcription of industrial and urban noise); it is rather to Dadaist typography that he addresses this reproach, taking for example an invitation designed by Tristan Tzara for the “Soirée du cœur à Barbe,” a Dada event held in Paris in July 1923. Rather brief on Berlin Dada (Grosz, Heartfield, and Huelsenbeck are mentioned, ▲ but Raoul Hausmann’s phonetic poems are not), he salutes Schwitters, notably for his “Theses on Typography” published in • the special issue of *Merz* devoted to “Typoreklame” in the spring of 1924 (a double spread of which is later reproduced in Tschichold’s book, devoted to an advertisement for Pelikan [2], the ink-producer for whom El Lissitzky would soon produce one of his best photograms, also reproduced). Tschichold expedites the Bauhaus in one sentence (all the more surprising since the production of its participants, not only Moholy-Nagy [3] and Bayer but also Joost Schmidt, figures abundantly in the book), and is done ■ with his praise of van Doesburg and *De Stijl* with just one paragraph, before concluding with the work of El Lissitzky, clearly cast as the major hero of this story (more of his works are reproduced in the book than that of any other artist or designer).

The impulse of the Soviet avant-garde

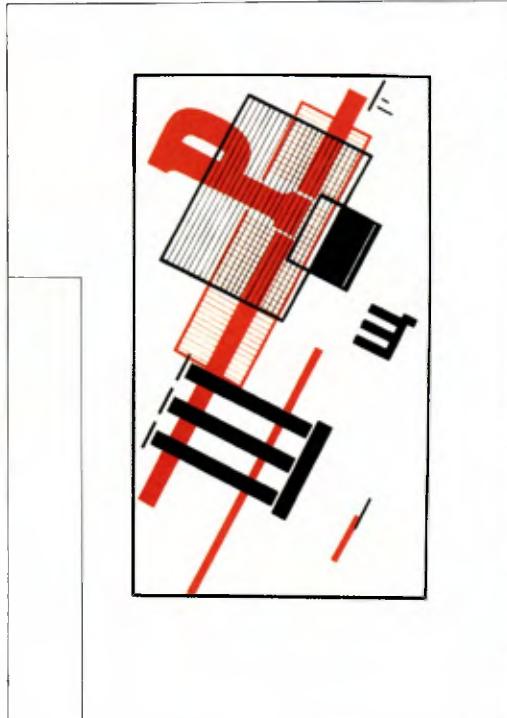
Indeed, throughout *Die neue Typographie*, the Russian artist’s arrival in Germany at the end of 1921 and his tireless activity there for the next three years is implicitly presented as the main cause for the radical turn modern German typography took at that time. True, later on Tschichold would always trace his own discovery of “the new typography” to his visit to the Bauhaus for its famous ◆ summer 1923 exhibition, but then he had only just completed his



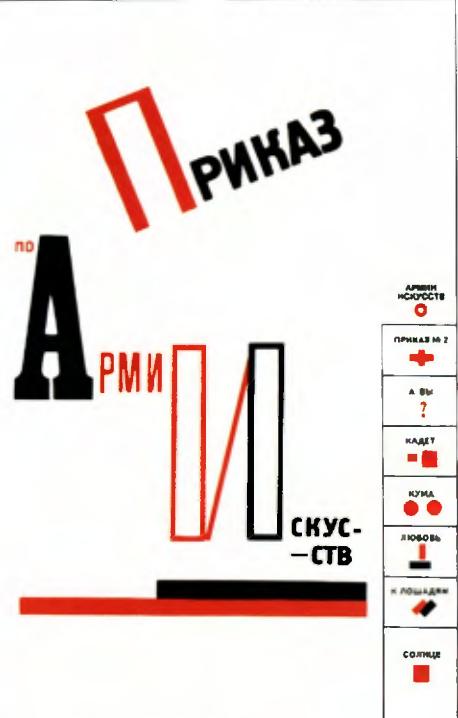
2 • Kurt Schwitters, advertisement for Pelikan Ink, *Merz*, no. 11, 1924



3 • László Moholy-Nagy, *Bauhausbucher 14: Von Material zu Architektur*, 1929
Book cover



4 • El Lissitzky, "The Art Army," double-page spread from Vladimir Mayakovsky's *For the Voice*, 1922



apprenticeship in traditional design: though still rather timid, the innovations of Weimar's Bauhaus—prior to Moholy-Nagy's and his student Bayer's conversion to the Constructivist vernacular—must have felt to the young Tschichold like thunderous battle cries. Introduced to El Lissitzky's work shortly thereafter, notably to the layout of his journal *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet* (1922–3), and even more to that of Vladimir Mayakovsky's book of poems entitled *For the Voice*, which he long held an unsurpassable masterpiece [4], Tschichold would immediately become a champion of Soviet avant-garde design, praising not only El Lissitzky's work but also that of Aleksandr Rodchenko, particularly this artist's own version ▲ of a Mayakovsky book of poems, *About This* (1923), saluted as the first volume solely illustrated with photomontages.

Tschichold's assessment of El Lissitzky's eminent role is undoubtedly correct. The abrupt transformation of Schwitters's typography in the immediate aftermath of his encounter with the Russian artist is patent, and the same could be said of Moholy-Nagy's and van Doesburg's: a tell-tale sign, each of them immediately adopts the thick black lines and emphatic contrasts that characterize the layout of *Veshch'* (Schwitters in *Merz*, the no. 8/9 issue of which, entitled *Nasci*, he actually coauthored with El Lissitzky in the spring of 1924 [5]; Moholy-Nagy in his "typo-photo scenario" called *Dynamic of the Metropolis*, included in his 1925 Bauhaus book *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* [Painting, Photography, Film]; and van Doesburg in his design for *Mecano*, the Dada periodical he had launched under the pseudonym I. K. Bonset). Of course, if these artists were immediately seduced by the El Lissitzky model, it is because it corresponded to what they were themselves trying to formulate in their own work but each had difficulty doing: Schwitters because he could not easily abandon the random

collage-effect of Dadaist typography; Moholy-Nagy, because despite his recent enthusiasm for geometric abstraction and the machine age, he had not yet freed his typographic production from the expressionist tradition it had been following; and van Doesburg because, aside from the Dadaist layouts he had been emulating in *Mecano*, the only other resource he had at his disposal was the ▲ Neoplastic grid, which, strangely enough, he had never known how to adapt to typographic purposes, but which by then he found too static anyway (on this score, El Lissitzky and Schwitters proved him wrong with the inside pages of *Nasci*, where various photographic fragments are linked by black or gray lines on an open white field animated by the asymmetric distribution of masses).

El Lissitzky was one of the most articulate artists of his generation (his famous "Lecture on Russian Art," which he delivered in many German cities throughout 1922, as well as in Holland, remained for long the best account, and most intelligent analysis, of early Soviet art). He was also an ardent pedagogue, "always using his unerring pencil to demonstrate any idea put forward by him," to quote his future wife and first biographer, Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers. Needless to say, his precepts, already reverberated by the manifestos of Schwitters and Moholy-Nagy, are directly echoed in "the principles of the new typography" that comprise the second quarter of Tschichold's book.

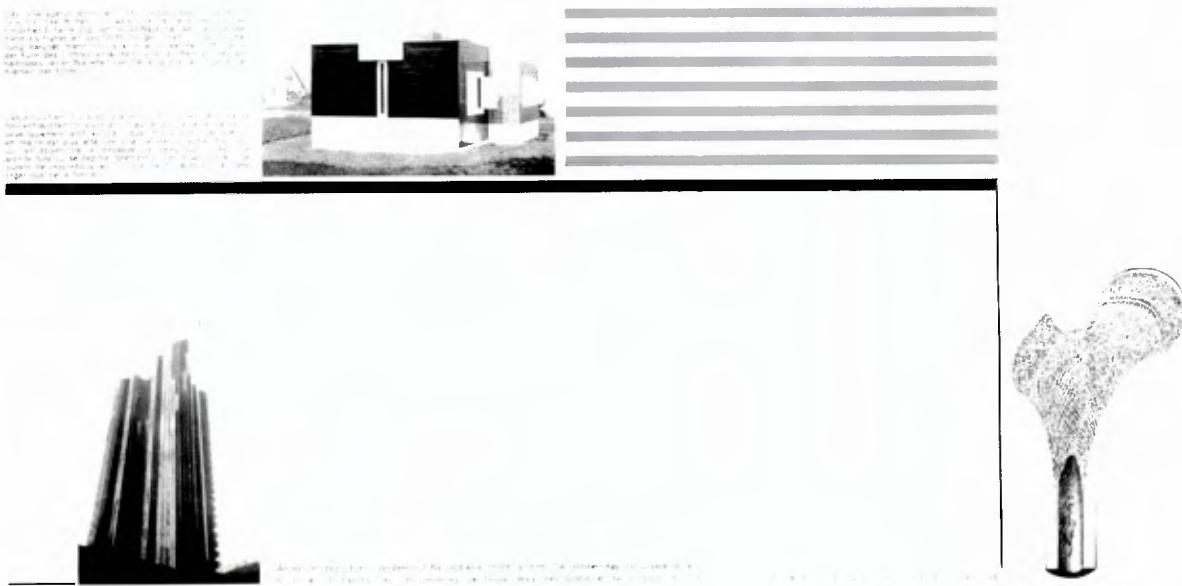
Form from function

The first of these principles, clearly partaking of the optimistic Taylorism of the period, are those pertaining to *rationalization*, *mechanization*, and *standardization*. "Modern man has to absorb every day a mass of printed matter" that surpasses in quantity

anything he has been accustomed to, and whose reading thus requires a radical change of speed. In turn, this necessary acceleration at the level of reception requires of the printed matter itself that it be more efficiently (quickly) readable and more visually startling in order to stand out from the universal grayness of the printed world and to compete with other visual stimuli (the case is made without any scruple with regard to advertisement). “The new book demands the new writer. Ink-pots and goose-quills are dead,” El Lissitzky had written in his manifesto “Topography of Typography,” first published in *Merz* no. 4 (July 1923) and reprinted in full by Tschichold. There is nothing unexpected in this prolegomenon: the hymn to technology conceived as a “kind of second nature,” in the words of Tschichold, is plain Constructivist parlance (“both technology and nature use the same laws of economy, precision, minimum friction, and so on”). Yet, because he was trained as a printer, Tschichold is more exacting than his peers in his demands from the new techniques: he can fully appreciate the limits imposed on artists like El Lissitzky and others by the traditional tools of the typesetter, and even more forcefully than them urge the printing trade to develop machines able to cope with their desire for a fully fledged “typophoto,” in which text and images would be not only visually but also technologically equivalent.

The second principle is that of *motivation*, and here, with the help of El Lissitzky’s ethos, imported from the debates that had inflamed the Soviet avant-garde a few years before, Tschichold is able to put his finger on an obstacle in the road of functional

typography. Until then motivation in typography, following Ferdinand de Saussure’s famous opposition between motivated signs (like figurative painting) and arbitrary ones (like words) had been understood in terms of mimetic representation. Yet, since typographic signs like letters are arbitrary, the only things they can “imitate” in themselves, through their size or orientation, are some properties of the sounds they transcribe; they can also, through their graphic disposition on the page, diagrammatically imitate the shape of an object. (The first case is that of Marinetti’s *mots en liberté*, whose graphic signs—such as GRAAAACQ—are conceived as the rendering of street noises through an implicit code according to which **LARGE** and **bold** translates louder than small and *italics*; ▲ the second case is that of *calligrammes*, an age-old tradition revived in the early teens by the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, and not particularly attuned to the demands of “speed-reading”). The Russian Futurists, particularly Velemir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenikh, and many Dadaists (Haussmann above all), were all dreaming of freeing language from the servitude of imitation, to celebrate “language as such” by creating pure sound poetry (sounds that would not refer to anything in particular except themselves and would form a new language—which they often thought of as “universal” since it did not depend on any national idiom). But this only suppressed one layer of mimetic motivation: the sounds themselves were not imitating anything, but the letters transcribing them on the page were still conceived as their graphic representation—and vice versa, in the more frequent case when the writing



5 • El Lissitzky, double-page spread from *Nasci, Merz*, no. 8/9, April–July 1924

▲ 1912

was first and its vocal enactment second. In fact, Kruchenikh and Khlebnikov's 1913 manifesto "The Letter as Such" even resorts to the dubious discipline of graphology in order to justify their oddly anti-machine-age production of handwritten books: since "a word written in one handwriting or set in one typeface is not at all similar to the same word in another written form," it should be written by the poet himself so that his "handwriting, idiosyncratically influenced by mood, conveys this mood to the reader independently of the words."

With Tschichold, "motivation" leaves the realm of mimesis to enter that of teleology: something is motivated not because it resembles anything else but because its shape is determined by its purpose. A turning point is El Lissitzky's design of Mayakovsky's *For the Voice*, already mentioned: contrary to what is often thought about this little typographical jewel, it is not the opening pages of each poem, conceived as *calligrammes*, that honor the fact it is destined to be read out loud (as its title indicates), but the thumb index helping the reader to quickly locate the poem he or she wants to find. "The New Typography is distinguished from the old by the fact that its first objective is to develop its visible form out of the function of the text.... The function of printed text is communication, emphasis (word value), and the logical sequence of the contents," writes Tschichold, who adds: "The typographer must take the greatest care to study how his work is read and ought to be read. It is true that we usually read from top left to bottom right [in the West]—but that is not a law." That the function of the text should determine its printed form explains the aversion of the "new typographer" to symmetrical designs: symmetry is an *a priori* form, applied at the ready without the slightest consideration for the nature of the text. Furthermore (and this is obviously said with advertisement in mind), because of its persistent domination, anything that departs from it will catch the eye. "The New Typography so designs text matter that the eye is led from one word and one group of words to the next ... through the use of different type-sizes, weights, placing in relation to space, color, etc." There is something shamelessly authoritarian in the productions of the "new typography": it tells your gaze where to go (no wonder that the domains it rapidly conquered were political propaganda and publicity).

The third principle posited by Tschichold—a typically modernist one—is that of *medium-specificity*: to be functional and rational, typography had to be cleansed of all extraneous importations, the most egregious of them being gratuitous decoration (taking his cue from the field of architecture, in which modernist discourse had by then matured into a canon, Tschichold invoked an 1898 essay by Adolf Loos against ornament). Of course, what could be deemed essential to typography was particularly hard to pin down at a moment when the technology was in rapid transformation. But technical conditions were not the only parameters involved: just as El Lissitzky had taken pride in the fact that in order to compose *For the Voice* he had only used the traditional materials he could find in the typesetter's shop, Tschichold mentioned that

the typographical character he used for his own book was only the best that was at his disposal at the time—ergo, materials are less important than how they are used. Furthermore, the materiality of the typographic medium consists for the most part in elements that had been repressed in the "old typography" (just like, say, the planarity of painting was repressed in pre-modernist painting). A case in point is this rule: "The New Typography uses the effectiveness of the former 'background' [note the quotation marks] quite deliberately, and considers the blank white spaces on the paper as formal elements just as much as the areas of black type." At first glance this seems a mere echo of the fight against the figure/ground hierarchy that had played such an important role in the pictorial field ever since Cézanne and Seurat (and was most exactly articulated in the works of the De Stijl members around 1918 and, at the very moment Tschichold's book was being published, in that of ▲ the Polish Constructivist painter—and typographer—Wladyslaw Strzeminski). But pictorial modernism was no more than a welcome ally on that score: the principle that in printed matters "blanks" are as significant as words had already long ago been formulated within the field of language and by extension book design, notably by the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé in the preface of his *Coup de dés* (1897), undoubtedly the first masterpiece of modern typography (and to which Marinetti—reluctantly—and Apollinaire—lovingly—were both clearly indebted).

A type for modernity

Among the "unnecessary conventions" that the modernist creed embraced by Tschichold was poised to lambast was the use of serifs in printed characters. Tschichold went as far to claim that sans-serif characters were the only ones corresponding to the speed of modern life (speed of production as well as of reception) and thus should be used *exclusively*—except, he admits, in case of parody. Tschichold was not alone in his passionate defense of sans serif—Moholy-Nagy and Bayer at the Bauhaus had been among its most ardent promoters [6]—and in retrospect the prevalence of sans-serif characters in functional typography at the time seems a direct response to the omnipresence of Fraktur (a character that is all serifs, one could say) in the German printed world, the work of typographers of other countries happily taking their cues from their German colleagues without having to enter a painful debate about national identity.

Another specifically German feature that played a role in the ideological formation of functional typography is the particular circumstance of the German written language according to which all nouns have to be capitalized. Even though Jakob Grimm had already campaigned against it in the nineteenth century (and had requested that, as in English and other languages using the Roman alphabet, capitals be used only for proper names and at the beginning of sentences), the first sustained attack against this custom—still in practice today—was the 1920 book *Sprache und Schrift* (Speech and Writing), authored by the engineer Walter

6 • Herbert Bayer, exhibition poster for "Kandinsky Jubiläums-Ausstellung zum 60. Geburtstag," 1926



Porstmann (1886–1959), one of Tschichold's heros in that he devised the DIN standardization of paper format on which we are still dependent today (among other things the A4 size is a direct product of it).

The urge to standardize, which occupies a large portion of Tschichold's précis, takes hold of the second, practical part of his book—the part that probably accounts for its immediate success. Abandoning the grandstanding of the previous chapters, Tschichold reveals himself the utmost pragmatist. Standardized formats and proportions are discussed for every single kind of typographic item figuring on his long list, generously replete with successful examples authored by him or his peers and countless words of advice to the neophyte typographer (including which mistake to avoid and how), a bibliography, and a list of suppliers—even the personal address of all the practitioners whose works are reproduced (one wonders how many readers wrote to El Lissitzky, and if those putative letters reached him in Moscow). There perhaps lies the really original aspect of Tschichold's book: in being among other things a handbook, it signals that it has nothing to do with Utopia, that it belongs to the real world. Of course, the vague quasi-socialist claims made here and there are not mere smokescreens—it was possible then to believe that the shape of a book could help change the world!—even though, as Robin Kinross notes, they were mocked in a review published in *bauhaus*, the journal of the school whose directorship had just shifted to the Marxist architect Hannes Meyer. But just as Gropius, Meyer's predecessor, had been keen to underline that the Bauhaus products could all be mechanically produced (and had widely publicized the school's few successes at that), Tschichold wanted to make sure that the industry got his message, no matter if the nod toward capitalism and consumerism that his emphasis on advertisement efficiency represented contradicted his stated political views.

Unlike all the artists he celebrates in his book, Tschichold was a professional typographer (that is, he had no other activity), and as such he was far better equipped than his peers to find flaws in his own precepts. Unlike Bayer, for example, he never went as far as suppressing *all* capitals (Bayer stuck to his dogma all his life, which made all his texts difficult to read, contrary to what he seriously believed, since it suppresses the marker of a sentence's beginning); and as soon as 1935, Tschichold had no qualms using serif characters for the cover of his *Typographische Gestaltung*, as if to prove that one could create a modern design using old types (much better in any case, he warns in this book, than when sans-serif characters are badly used). By the late thirties, the tradition in which Tschichold had been steeped in his teens caught up with him. Exiled in Switzerland after Hitler's rise to power, he gradually relinquished all the principles he had so eloquently defended. By the time he left for England to become designer-in-chief for Penguin Books, he was one of the strongest opponents of the "new typography," and many of his book covers developed an eerie family resemblance with some of those he had been lambasting in *Die neue Typographie*. When Max Bill charged him with treason, in 1946, he went as far as equating the creed of modernist typographers, including his former self, as "not so very far from the delusion of 'order' that ruled the Third Reich." A page, sadly, had been turned. YAB

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1929

The “Film und Foto” exhibition, organized by the Deutscher Werkbund and held in Stuttgart from May 18 to July 7, displays a spectrum of international photographic practices and debates: the exhibition demarcates a climax in twentieth-century photography and marks the emergence of a new critical theory and historiography of the medium.

Partially motivated by the impact of World War I, the visual culture of Weimar Germany had increasingly focused on the photographic and the filmic image in all its variations: some authors have argued that this was in order to turn away from the traditional models of cultural production that still prevailed in France, England, and Italy even in the late twenties. Organized by Gustav Stotz (assisted by the architect Bernhard Pankok, the typographic designer Jan Tschichold, and others) on behalf of the Deutscher Werkbund (founded in 1907 to reconnect industry, artisanal, and artistic production), “Film und Foto” [1] displayed a tremendous diversity of international photographic practices. More than 200 photographers showed 1,200 photographs, and each national section had its individual curator. Edward Weston and Edward Steichen served for the United States section, which included works by Weston himself, his son Brett Weston, ▲ Charles Sheeler [2], and Imogen Cunningham; Christian Zervos ● presented Eugène Atget and Man Ray for France; Dutch designer and typographer Piet Zwart was in charge of the Dutch and Belgian ■ section; El Lissitzky selected the work to represent the Soviet ♦ Union; while László Moholy-Nagy and Stotz curated the German section, with works by, among others, Aenne Mosbacher [3], Aenne Biermann [4], Erhard Dorner, and Willi Ruge. Moholy-Nagy also conceived and designed the first room introducing the history and techniques of photography, and in a third, his own separate exhibition space, he displayed the principles and materials of his *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (Painting, Photography, Film) published as a Bauhaus book in 1925.

Not surprisingly, it was at this point that the professional identities of the new photographers, as suppliers of images of daily life, of political activities, of current events, of tourism, of fashion and consumption, were formed. By contrast, the artistic and functional “identities” of photography became increasingly fractured. It is important to recognize that “Film und Foto” succeeded because it summarized all of these tendencies of photography in the twenties. First of all, since the rise of the illustrated magazines, photography had emerged as the new medium of political and historical information (rivalled only by the weekly newsreels), integral to the formation of Weimar culture. As contributors to illustrated weeklies in Germany such as the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (BIZ) or the

Ullstein *UHU*, which were the precursors of *Paris Match* in France ▲ and *Life* in the US, photographers opened up immensely important new information resources. Secondly, photography had achieved a central role in the design, development, and expansion of the advertising and fashion industries, aimed at the new lower-middle-class of (often female) white-collar workers in Berlin and other large industrialized urban centers. Thirdly, a new, antithetical model emerged—a type of counterformation to paid photojournalism, photographic advertisement, and product propaganda.



1 • Unknown designer, *Film und Foto*, 1929
Poster, lithograph on paper, 84.1 × 58.4 (33 1/8 × 23)



2 • Charles Sheeler, *Pennsylvania Barn*, c. 1915

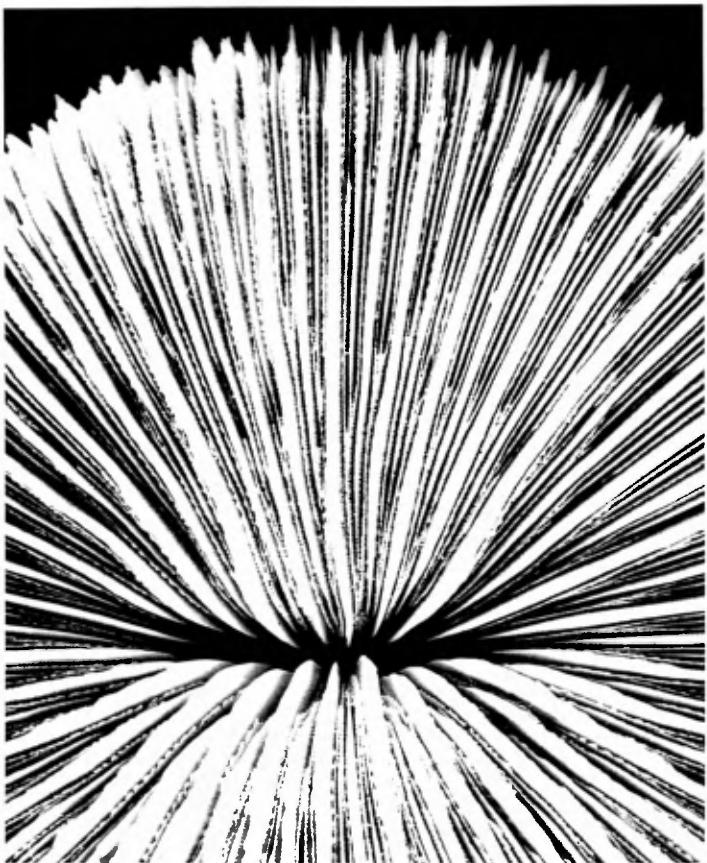
Silver-gelatin print, 19.1 x 23.9 (7 1/2 x 9 1/2)

Product propaganda and the proletarian public sphere

This model was developed as the result of attempts to abolish the professional specialization of ideological image production, and to make the tools of photography directly available to the working class. Organized to a considerable degree by the German Communist Party, the Workers' Photography Movement enabled the anonymous worker to participate in the emergent process of political and cultural self-representation. It organized its educational and agitational functions in the Workers' Photography Clubs and in Willi Münzenberg's journal *Der Arbeiter Fotograf*, published from 1926 onward. "Photography as a weapon" became the slogan that was coined in opposition to photography's increasing importance in the indoctrination of the mass public sphere with the ideologies of total consumption and the commercialization of the visual language of everyday life. Appropriately then, the "Film und Foto" exhibition expanded photography's traditional artistic parameters by including photojournalism, advertisement and amateur photography, as well as the political photomontage work of John Heartfield, yet it was primarily defined by the aesthetic contrast between Moholy-Nagy's concept of "New Vision" photography and Albert Renger-Patzsch's (1897–1966) project of "photographic photography," the technically masterful images of Neue Sachlichkeit. Moholy-Nagy and

Renger-Patzsch had first pronounced their oppositional views of the "new" medium and the specificity of its aesthetic conventions in 1927, in the first issue of the new magazine *Das Deutsche Lichtbild* (The German Photograph). While Moholy-Nagy had prioritized the technical, optical and chemical dimensions in order to foreground photography's experimental and constructive qualities, Renger-Patzsch had insisted on its almost ontological realism: "In photography one should surely proceed from the essence of the object and one should try to represent it with photographic means alone, regardless of whether it is a human being, landscape, architecture, or something else" [5]. And later Renger-Patzsch stated that "the secret of good photography is that it can obtain artistic qualities just like a work of art, through its realism. Therefore let us leave art to the artists, and let us attempt to create photography with the means of photography, that can hold its own because of its photographic qualities, without having to borrow from art."

Moholy-Nagy's self-reflexive deployment of the medium, featuring photograms, superimpositions, the scientific devices of macrophotography and X-rays, as well as the cinematic devices of rapidly alternating close-up and long-distance shots, was matched by his emphasis on the diversity of photographic procedures, be they chemical, optical, or technical. He foregrounded cameraless photography as one of his "inventions." Even though



3 • Aenne Mosbacher, *Koralle*, 1928



4 • Aenne Biermann, *Aschenschale*, c. 1928

the photograph had been deployed shortly before by artists such as Christian Schad and Man Ray (and cameraless photography of course had been known since the times of Anna Atkins and William Fox Talbot in the nineteenth century), it was Moholy-Nagy who now redefined the photogram practically, theoretically, and philosophically. Associating the photogram not only with a perfectly aperspectival space, he also saw it as the concrete embodiment of his project to use "light instead of pigment," to articulate

"space through light," and to provide photographic evidence of a "time-space continuum."

All of these strategies originated in an optimism about the medium that considered camera vision as a powerful expansion of natural eyesight, even its technical prosthesis. Moholy-Nagy had stated in *Malerei, Photographie, Film* that "the photographic apparatus can complement our optical instruments, the eyes, and even make them perfect. This principle has already been deployed during scientific experiments of motion studies (striding, jumping and galloping) as well as in images of zoological, botanical and mineralogical forms (microscopic enlargements).... This becomes equally evident in the so-called mistaken, but all the more astonishing photographic images, taken from a bird's-eye or worm's-eye perspective, or from below or from a tilted angle that surprise us all the more today."^[6] Clearly, Moholy-Nagy's experimental book and his display at "Film und Foto" inspired Walter Benjamin to write in 1931 (in his crucial review of some of the above-mentioned photography books, entitled "A Short History of Photography") that "it is a different nature that speaks to the camera than that speaking to the eye."

Naturalizing technology

The modernist abolition of central perspectival space in Cubist painting had led to a form of photography that aestheticized modernity's angularity and spatial discontinuities. Pictorial overviews of the landscape or the figure were displaced by the diagrammatic and the detail. In their compulsion to assimilate all forms of experience into the governing principles of technocratic order, photographers discovered that even the principles of modernist construction were ontologically prefigured in the natural orders of plants and petrifications. These photographic comparisons between natural and technological structures led to the discovery of the work of Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932) and to the publication in 1928 of his collection of photographs, *Urformen der Kunst* (Prototypes of Art), which came to be seen as precursors to the photography of Neue Sachlichkeit.

Blossfeldt, initially trained as a sculptor, had been working as an instructor of drawing and mold casting at the Institute for Higher Education in Arts and Crafts (*Kunstgewerbeschule*) in Berlin since 1898. Increasingly he used photographs rather than plaster casts of plants as the models from which students were to learn the fundamental skills of naturalist drawing and functionalist design (in the traditions established by architect, teacher, and theorist Gottfried Semper and by Theodor Haeckel in the mid-nineteenth century). His first photographs of plants were published in 1896 and, maintaining the exact or similar technical tools, standards, and photographic principles for the next thirty years, Blossfeldt produced an enormous archive of glass plates recording the extreme differentiations of individual plant formations [7], intending them to be used primarily as teaching supplements in his drawing classes. It was not until 1928, when the art dealer Karl Nierendorf initiated the publication of *Urformen der Kunst* with Ernst Wasmuth



5 • Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Natterkopf*, 1925

in Berlin, that Blossfeldt was discovered as the great pioneering photographer of the emerging aesthetic of Neue Sachlichkeit; Moholy-Nagy thus included him in the entrance room of the "Film und Foto" exhibition the following year.

Making macroscopic detail and scientific series the epistemic structures of photographic observation, Blossfeldt developed the format of a photographic typology that would reverberate all the way into the sixties in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. At the time of Neue Sachlichkeit in the twenties, Blossfeldt's photographs were celebrated as evidence that modernist technical construction and the identity of function and ornament had a foundation in nature. More importantly, Blossfeldt's magical imagery of plant details responded to the desire to reconcile the fragmented experience of time and space under the conditions of industrialized labor with an ontological experience of natural rhythms and evolution. If the visual contemplation of the machine could serve to eventually ban its menacing and alienating presence by naturalizing it using photographic means, then the detailed detection of a serially and structurally produced nature would comfort the spectator in the discovery of the profound unity of manmade and natural orders and structures. Franz Roh, the critic who would publish the crucial book *Foto-Auge* (Photo-Eye) in 1929 to accompany the "Film und Foto" exhibition, had already stated in an essay on post-Expressionist art in 1927 that "while expression had been detected until recently in the movement of life, we now discover the power of expression already in the stillness of being itself, while listening carefully to the *ursounds* of a mere entity that has come fully into being." Walter Benjamin in his essay in 1931 associated Blossfeldt with Atget's sobriety and singled out his photographs not only as early examples of photography's emancipation from Pictorialism, but also as evidence of its privileged access to the optical unconscious.

From now on, nature would be assimilated into technology, and technology had to be naturalized, or as Thomas Mann famously wrote in his review of Renger-Patzsch's 1928 book *Die Welt ist schön* (The World is Beautiful): "But what if now that psychic

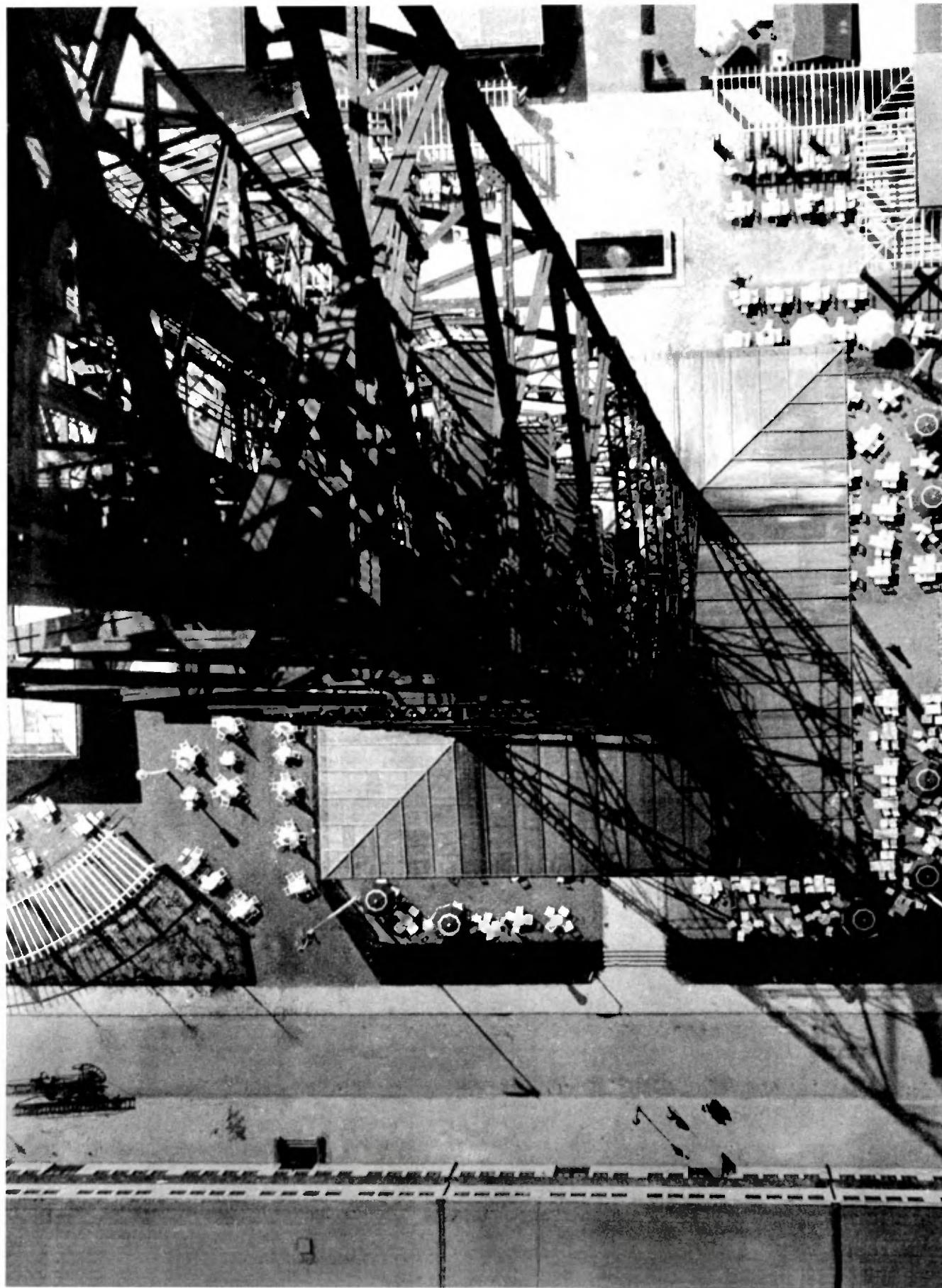
experience falls prey to the technological, the technological itself becomes soulful?" Renger-Patzsch's book, decorated with an emblem that combines the structures of an agave cactus with that of a telegraph mast, in a perplexing claim to correspondence, was initially meant to be called *Die Dinge* (The Things). It was Carl Georg Heise, the author of the preface, and the curator who had given Renger-Patzsch his first museum exhibition in 1927, who suggested the more emphatic title, involuntarily signaling to its critics the essentially affirmative character of Neue Sachlichkeit.

Walter Benjamin's response was the most devastating, identifying the problems of Renger-Patzsch's Neue Sachlichkeit photography more lucidly than anybody, when he stated: "What is creative in photography is its submission to fashion, and, not surprisingly, its motto is 'The World is Beautiful.' In that title, a tendency reveals itself that can position the montage of a soup can in cosmic space, but it cannot grasp any of the most elementary human contexts. Even in its most oneiric subjects, it still initiates more of the object's saleability rather than its cognition. Since the true visage of this type of photography is advertisement, (de-) construction would of course be its rightful counterpart."

The serial subject

But the photography of Neue Sachlichkeit was of course determined by a larger spectrum of contradictory promises and social interests, and its definition as a new type of "technological vision" lent itself in an ideal fashion to all of these tasks. First of all, the photographic aesthetic of Weimar articulated an anti-Expressionist restraint that began in Weimar Germany around 1925 as a response to the general political and economic stabilization of the period. Secondly, as a technologically formed aesthetic, it was part of a larger process of modernization in which the photographic practices themselves adjusted to a rapidly changing social environment, that is, the creation of a mass public sphere and rapidly advancing forms of industrialization.

Traditional German aesthetic thought, grounded in the subject's dialectical relationship to nature, was shifting to an aesthetic in which the primacy of nature would be displaced by the desire to associate the work of the artist with the advancement of industry and technology. And lastly, and most importantly perhaps, only photography, with its capacity to select, stage, and present objects as utterly authentic, could provide the images for a process of total commodification: only photography, with its intrinsically fetishistic structure, could record the impact of commodity fetishism on the subject's daily experience (which would become the project of Surrealism more than that of Neue Sachlichkeit). As Herbert Molderings has poignantly observed, the photographers of the Neue Sachlichkeit discovered their aesthetic project only "when it became evident that the serial principle and the intensification of repetition defined industrial production in general. Henceforth the rhythm of standardization and the ornamental accumulation of eternally identical objects would determine all the images of the new photographer."



6 • László Moholy-Nagy, *Berlin*, 1928



7 • Karl Blossfeldt, *Impatiens Glandulifera; Balsamine, Springkraut*, 1927

Silver salts print, dimensions unknown

▲ Paradoxically, August Sander (1867–1964), undoubtedly the greatest photographer of Neue Sachlichkeit, and one of the outstanding figures in the history of photography, was not included in the “Film und Foto” exhibition. Sander, who had been running a portrait studio since the beginning of the first decade of the twentieth century, had emphasized all along that photography had to be purged of its Pictorialist kitsch in favor of what he called “exact photography.” In the early twenties, Sander had initiated a long-term project which attempted to construct an exhaustive documentation, entitled *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Citizens of the Twentieth Century). His project—not unlike that of Atget’s disappearing Paris—resulted in an archive of tens of thousands of negatives (large parts of which were destroyed first by the Nazi government and subsequently by Allied bombs). Sander envisaged the eventual publication as consisting of forty-five portfolios of twelve images each that would represent and classify members of Weimar society according to their professional and class identities.

The ends of an archive

When a preliminary selection from the work was published in 1929, under the title *Antlitz der Zeit* (Face of Our Time), with an introduction by the novelist Alfred Döblin, it became instantly evident that Sander’s was neither an ordinary portrait project nor a photographic enterprise that could be summoned for the

aesthetics of Neue Sachlichkeit. Once again, it was Walter Benjamin’s acumen that situated Sander’s project in the most poignant historical context. Calling it an “atlas in physiognomic exercise,” or a training manual (an *Übungsatlas*), Benjamin positioned Sander’s *Antlitz der Zeit* in an astonishing, but historically precise comparison to the new (anti)portraits of the photographic and filmic culture of the Soviet Union. In both instances, Benjamin argued, the need for a new portrait form was articulated, one in which not only would a new social class find its proper representation (as in Soviet film), but one in which concern for a scientific understanding of social collectivity would displace the bourgeois subject’s false claims for autonomy.

Sander was closely affiliated with the Cologne Progressives group, whose engagement in formulating a radically different conception of the subject and of a new proletarian public sphere had led them to an increased interest in social typology. One of the group’s founders, Cologne artist Franz Wilhelm Seiwert had published a series of typological woodcuts called *Sieben Antlitz der Zeit* (Seven Portraits of our Time) in 1921, inspiring Sander’s title.

While historians of photography have wondered why Sander’s *Antlitz der Zeit* was confiscated and destroyed by the Nazi government in 1934, the answer seems relatively clear. First of all, Sander’s project of a scientific typology of the social collective deconstructed the traditional safeguard of the singular bourgeois portrait. It replaced it with a collectivist photographic archive, unacceptable to an emerging totalitarian regime that was based on the destruction of the political identity of class and collectivity. Secondly, Sander’s *Übungsatlas* delivered the last glance at an extraordinarily differentiated society, and the asynchronous diversity of the subject positions that Germany’s first liberal democracy had allowed for. With the destruction of Sander’s book and its photographic plates, the fascists attempted not only to eradicate the memory of that democracy, but—most significantly of all—to liquidate any possibility of a photographic analysis of social relations and their impact on the formation of the subject right from the very beginning. BB

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- 282** 1930a The introduction of mass consumer and fashion magazines in twenties and thirties Weimar Germany generates new frameworks for the production and distribution of photographic imagery and helps foster the emergence of a group of important women photographers. BB
- 287** 1930b Georges Bataille reviews *L'Art primitif in Documents*, making apparent a rift within the avant-garde's relation to primitivism and a deep split within Surrealism. RK
box • Carl Einstein YAB
- 292** 1931a Alberto Giacometti, Salvador Dalí, and André Breton publish texts on "the object of symbolic function" in the magazine *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*: Surrealism extends its aesthetic of fetishism and fantasy into the realm of object-making. HF
- 297** 1931b As Joan Miró reaffirms his vow to "assassinate painting" and Alexander Calder's delicate mobiles are replaced by the stolid stabiles, European painting and sculpture display a new sensibility that reflects Georges Bataille's concept of the "formless." RK
- 303** 1933 Scandal breaks out over the portrait of Lenin by Diego Rivera in the murals for the Rockefeller Center: the Mexican mural movement produces public political mural work in various American locations and establishes a precedent for political avant-garde art in the United States. AD
- 308** 1934a At the First All Union Congress of Writers, Andrei Zhdanov lays down the doctrine of Soviet Socialist Realism. BB
- 314** 1934b In "The Sculptor's Aims," Henry Moore articulates a British aesthetic of direct carving in sculpture that mediates between figuration and abstraction, between Surrealism and Constructivism. HF
- 319** 1935 Walter Benjamin drafts "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," André Malraux initiates "The Museum without Walls," and Marcel Duchamp begins the *Boîte-en-Valise*: the impact of mechanical reproduction, surfacing into art through photography, is felt within aesthetic theory, art history, and art practice. RK
- 324** 1936 As part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and other photographers are commissioned to document rural America in the grip of the Great Depression. RK
box • Works Progress Administration RK
- 329** 1937a The European powers contest one another in national pavilions of art, trade, and propaganda at the International Exhibition in Paris, while the Nazis open the "Degenerate 'Art'" exhibition, a vast condemnation of modernist art, in Munich. HF
- 334** 1937b Naum Gabo, Ben Nicholson, and Leslie Martin publish *Circle* in London, solidifying the institutionalization of geometric abstraction. YAB
- 338** 1937c Pablo Picasso unveils *Guernica* in the Spanish Republican pavilion of the International Exhibition in Paris. BB

The introduction of mass consumer and fashion magazines in twenties and thirties Weimar Germany generates new frameworks for the production and distribution of photographic imagery and helps foster the emergence of a group of important women photographers.

1930-1930 It is no accident that an astonishingly large number of women were among the key photographers of European and American photographic culture in the twenties and thirties. The famous question posed by Linda Nochlin in an essay in 1972 entitled “Why have there been no great women artists?” would have to be reversed for this period with the question being “Why were there so many great women photographers in the twenties and thirties?” In introducing the work of some of these photographers, and in order to explain this phenomenon, numerous and contradictory factors have to be considered. Generally speaking, one could argue that photography provided access to a technical and scientific apparatus of image production that displaced, once and for all, the exclusionist patriarchal rule that had declared exceptional manual skill, if not virtuosity, to be the single valid criterion of art. Photography—the techno-scientific reorganization of images—was causally intertwined with a general reformulation of the concepts of male sublimation that lay at the root of artistic identity. This is evident, for example, in the paradigm shift occurring in the work of Florence Henri (1893–1982) after she had taken courses with ▲ László Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus in Dessau in 1927 (as well as with Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee).

Recognizing that photography had become the central instrument of image production within the industrialization of everyday life, Henri adopted the principles and practices of Moholy-Nagy’s “New Vision” photography. Returning to Paris in 1928, she wrote to her friend Lou Scheper :

Paris makes an incredibly old fashioned impression after the Bauhaus. I am no longer under its spell.... I am photographing.... I am fed up with painting and getting nowhere, and I have got an incredible number of ideas for photography.

The tensions and tendencies embodied in the photography of Weimar women became apparent in a comparison of self-portraits by two of the most important protagonists of photography in the twenties. Germaine Krull’s (1897–1985) *Self-Portrait with Ikarette* from 1925 [1] constructs the photographer’s image within a complex amalgam of tropes of modernity: firstly, the fragmentation of the body and the metonymic foregrounding of the indexical hands that self-reflexively perform the act of photographic

recording; secondly, the superimposition, if not the substitution, of the camera for the photographer’s physiognomy, causes the photographer’s eye and the optical device (the camera’s viewfinder) to collapse in a mechanomorphic symbiosis. And lastly, the tropes of the emancipated “New Woman,” in which the display of the technical apparatus is matched by an equally ostentatious display of the cigarette—offers yet another universal emblem of independence.

By contrast, Lotte Jacobi’s (1896–1990) *Self-Portrait* of c. 1930 [2] emerges not only from a dramatic painterly chiaroscuro, but also from a far more traditional concept of the portrait and the photograph. The probing introspection with which Jacobi faces the camera seems to be driven by both *desires* for and *doubts* about the very feasibility of portraiture and the credibility of that genre, in which the representation of the subject had been anchored for centuries. In Jacobi’s portrait the protagonist is not yet the camera itself, but is, rather, an artistic subject, albeit a struggling and desperate one. And yet, Jacobi’s attempt to maintain a hierarchical relation between the subject and a (presumably subservient) technological apparatus is uncannily contested by the camera’s glistening eye with its typographic inscription emerging from the dark of the studio space, and even more so by the ostentatiously lit remote-control cable that links machine and maker like an umbilical cord.

The “New Woman” as photographer

More concrete explanations for the increased numbers of women photographers can be found in the historical transformations of professional and educational institutions. Until the turn of the century, the traditional route to photographic education had been to work as an apprentice in the studio of a professional photographer (as did Jacobi, for example, who learned the profession in the workshop of her father and grandfather). Yet two institutions in Wilhelminian Germany offered photographic education within the curriculum when most of the traditional beaux-arts academies still barred female students. The first was the Institute for Photographic Education of the Lette Verein (founded in 1890 for the professional education of female photographers, it had begun with thirteen students and had 337 by 1919). The second major institution was the Teaching Institute for Photography (*Lehr- und*

▲ 1923, 1929



1 • Germaine Krull, *Self-Portrait with Ikkrette*, 1925

Silver-gelatin print, 20 × 15.1 (7 1/4 × 6)



2 • Lotte Jacobi, *Self-Portrait*, Berlin, c. 1930

Silver print, 32.1 × 25.1 (12 1/4 × 9 1/2)

1930–1939

Versuchsanstalt für Photographie), founded in Munich in 1900, which admitted women as of 1905; Krull, for example, studied with the American Pictorialist Frank Eugene Smith, who taught at the Munich Institute from 1907 to 1913. Nevertheless, it was not until 1921 that women could become full members of the German Professional Guild of Photographers. By the mid-twenties, photography was introduced in most German arts and crafts schools as a new medium within the curriculum of the applied arts. It had become more and more evident that the rapidly expanding need for advertisement and graphic design would benefit immensely from an increase in technical and artistic competence in photography. Thus, as of 1925 the Munich Institute for example, replaced its Pictorialist faculty and appointed younger photographers who were familiar with the aesthetics of "New Objectivity." Other private institutions, such as the Reimann Schule appointed the young "New Vision" photographer Lucia Moholy to its faculty, where she remained from 1930 to 1933. The Bauhaus made its first faculty appointment in photography only under the directorship of Hannes Meyer, who nominated Walter Peterhans in 1929 to direct the new photographic curriculum that was aligned with the courses for advertising and design. Until 1933, when the Bauhaus was closed by the Nazi government, eleven women had successfully completed the photography class, among them several

who went on to find considerable professional recognition, such as Ellen Auerbach (1906–2004), Grete Stern (1904–99), Elsa Franke (1910–1981) and Irena Blühova (1904–91) (not to mention those who—like Henri—had studied with Moholy-Nagy).

But of equal, if not greater importance, were the newly arising professional opportunities offered to women. Statistics from 1925 record that 11.5 million women were professionals (35.8 percent of the total working population), making up the majority of low-level workers at the conveyor belts of industrial mass production, of white-collar workers in offices, and of sales personnel in department stores and retail industries. The social role model of the "New Woman" not only provided access to forms of emancipated experience. It also constructed women as producers and consumers and as objects within the overall process of the industrialization of new desires. Photographic mass culture generated and responded to these new behavioral forms and needs.

The new culture of illustrated magazines first emerged in Berlin (there were 200 registered magazines devoted to women, fashion, and domestic culture alone), ranging from Ullstein's conservative middle-class *BIZ*, the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (circulation 1.7 million copies), to a counterpublication for the working class, Willi Münzenberg's *AIZ*, the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, sometimes reaching a print run of 350,000. Their equivalents in



3 • Ringl + Pit (Ellen Auerbach and Grete Stern), *Fragment of a Bride*, 1930

Silver print, 16.5 × 22 (6 1/8 × 8 1/8)

Paris—for which many of the Weimar photographers supplied images—ranged from Lucien Vogel’s liberal *VU* and Florent Fels’s *VOILA* to the left-wing *Regards* (where Lisette Model’s first photographs were published.)

These were soon followed by the American *Life* (whose first issue in 1936 had a cover photograph by Margaret Bourke White) and *Picture Post*, and the equivalent propaganda magazine in the Soviet Union, *USSR in Construction*. These photographic magazines would radically alter the image world of the bourgeois public sphere, either by constructing the earliest cohesive and totalizing forms of the new societies of spectacle and consumption, or by attempting to transform that sphere according to the needs of a newly emerging industrial proletariat and its public sphere.

The primary tasks of the illustrated magazines were achieved via four photographic genres. The first, visual reportage and photojournalism, had to simplify the complex narratives of history and politics by reducing them to a merely specular apprehension (the work of Alfred Eisenstaedt, Erich Salomon, or Felix Man, for example). The second, advertising photography, had to accelerate cycles of artificial actuality and immediate obsolescence. As product propaganda, photography had to modernize the objects and architectural spaces of everyday life according to the laws of an emerging consumer culture, while fashion photography had to initiate, sustain, and control the construction of new identities (such as the “New Woman”).

The photographic work of Ringl + Pit (Ellen Auerbach and Grete Stern) is of exceptional significance in Weimar advertising photography. In images such as *Fragment of a Bride* [3] or *Polski Monopol* (1930), the two former Bauhaus students implemented the functions of advertising photography while simultaneously putting them on display with a supremely ironical self-reflexivity (unlike ▲Albert Renger-Patzsch, their major rival in the field of Neue Sachlichkeit advertising photography). Both images concretize the two most important functions of the photograph as advertising: first, to serve as a deictic tool of ostentatious presentation (to render

details with the highest exactitude, for example, to dramatize the play of light and shadow, and to exaggerate the transparency or the reflexivity of the surfaces of seduction), and second, to suspend the object in a condition of extreme fragmentation and spatial isolation so that it became the irresistible commodity fetish.

Travel photography was a third type of image production that women photographers developed in Europe in the prewar period (for example, Lotte Rosenberg-Errell’s book *Kleine Reise zu Schwarzen Menschen* [Short Visit to Black People], published in 1931). Yet the genre of travel reportage became even more important after 1933 and in the immediate postwar period, more often than not as the result of exile. As with the previous genres, the motivations that defined and sustained it were manifold, ranging from the new medium’s engagement in amateur—and professional—anthropology and ethnography to the instigation of new forms of mass and global tourism, or originating in the political desire to report on people’s progress under radically changed historical and sociopolitical circumstances.

This stance is best exemplified in Jacobi’s extensive documentation of the newly developing social relations in the Asian states of the Soviet Union, the formerly theocratic Islamic nations of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan that had been recently secularized. Travel photography would also fulfill the opposite need, that is, to document the urgent need for political change under conditions of political repression, as recorded in Germaine Krull’s projects in Africa and Asia, or in Gisèle Freund’s (1912–2000) work produced during her emigration to Argentina, and in Mexico in the fifties, when, as a suspected leftist, she was barred from entering the United States.

Travel photography in the guise of social documentary or political reporting would inevitably deteriorate in the postwar period, even in the hands of the greatest photographers (e.g., Henri Cartier-Bresson). Photographers could no longer match the excess of exotic visuality (the result of an increased access to geopolitical and ethnic diversities in the process of an expanding global tourism for which these photographers often served as unwitting pioneers) with the level of analysis necessary to grasp the political and economic links between the hunger for photographic images in the urban centers and the profoundly different conditions of experience that governed colonized and postcolonial societies. All too often, therefore, postwar travel photography served the continuously intensifying spectacle of exoticization and “othering,” which found a first ▲epochal climax in Edward Steichen’s “The Family of Man” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955.

Three portrait positions

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly in the history of Weimar photography, we encounter the portrait in its most differentiated and dialectical forms. While still serving as the economic foundation of the photographic studio (the Berlin *Yellow Pages* for 1931 lists 600 photographic studios, of which at least 100 were owned and directed by women), the portrait also became the site where photography in



the thirties worked through its most profound contradictions. These ranged from the iterative production and distribution of images of the star, the new public persona whose function it was to compensate for the loss of subjective experience in the masses, to the contemplation of the precarious status—if not the final demise—of the representation of the bourgeois subject. The photograph's essential duality as both an exact indexical record and an artificial simulacrum (its most extreme form being the montage of photographs) lent itself to both the ideology of a physiognomically anchored identity and to the conception of subjectivity as pure construction.

At one extreme we find Erna Lendvai-Dircksen (1883–1962). Admitted as one of the first women members of the German Guild of Photographers in 1924, she ran one of the most successful portrait studios in Berlin. Lendvai-Dircksen claimed that a subject's identity was grounded in ethnicity and race, homeland and religion, and that therefore the portrait could best map that identity by tracing the physiognomy of the sitter as accurately as only photography would allow. In her lecture in 1933, "On German Photography," she polemicized against the "internationalist dissolution of the photograph by New Objectivity" and promised that her project would "save the German and the Germanic people's faces" and would follow the "inner obligation to participate in the restoration of the decaying German physiognomy." Not surprisingly, Lendvai-Dircksen not only became an ardent fascist herself in 1933, but her work would soon be published and distributed by the Nazi rulers as the photographic corroboration of their racist ideologies.

We find the dialectical opposite in portrait photographs by Freund and Jacobi, Annelise Kretschmer (1903–87), and in Helmar Lerski's

(1871–1956) project *Köpfe des Alltags* (Everyday Heads), published in 1931. In 1932 Freund had still been attempting to construct the image of the new proletarian and collective subject in her photographs of mass demonstrations [4] and Jacobi had produced portraits of the Communist candidate Ernst Thälmann for the cover of *AIZ* in a desperate attempt to prevent the Nazi Party from coming to power in the fatal elections of 1933. In these images—as in the photographs by ▲ Aleksandr Rodchenko and the Soviet avant-garde photographers working at that time—the subject is anonymous, and ostentatiously presented as constructed by class, social relations, and professional identities. In some of the most radical work of the time, the subject is constituted in the process of labor itself, as in the extraordinary series of images of street workers, taken by Ella Bergmann-Michel between 1928 and 1932 from a bird's-eye view, in which the ground of labor (the grid of cubic basalt blocks making up a street) and the laboring figure itself are fused in an inseparable unity.

We find, however, a third model of Weimar portrait photography in the extraordinary portraits that Krull and Freund produced in the late twenties in Germany and when exiled in France in the thirties, and in particular in the work of Jacobi, one of the greatest portraitists of the twentieth century, during her years in Berlin and New York. These images are defined by an innate sense of the subject's fragility, its historically determined transitional status. Their almost exhaustive account of the intellectuals and artists of the interwar period (such as Krull's portrait of Walter Benjamin in 1926) reminds us of Nadar's astonishing pantheon of portraits of the Republican intellectuals and artists in France after 1848. These images seem to hold on to the last moment of European subjectivity before the concept of

the subject and its social reality were annihilated by the joint onslights of fascist politics and engulfment by the image technologies of mass culture.

The subject in exile

As evident in her numerous portraits of actors of the period, for example *Lotte Lenya Weill* [5], Jacobi already seems to have recognized that the modern specular subject of the “star” would be constituted at the very intersection of fashion design, makeup, lighting techniques, and iterative distribution, in outright opposition to the traditional conception of unique subjectivity, that assumed “naturally” available markers of distinction (by class privilege) and the inevitable emanation of individual psychic presence. Photographs now appeared to be uniquely qualified to record images of that new type of constructed subjectivity. But Jacobi and Freund—like their great Viennese colleague Lisette Model—would also record subjectivity as suspended, in transition between Weimar culture and exile.

Freund had been a member of the Communist Student Organization at the University of Frankfurt, where she had been working on her doctoral dissertation under the tutelage of Karl Mannheim, Norbert Elias, and Theodor Adorno. Forced to emigrate to Paris in 1933, she saved her manuscript and subsequently completed it at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1936, where it was published in 1937 as the first social history of photography under the title *La Photographie en France au XIXème Siècle*.

Jacobi emigrated to New York in 1935. While stark chiaroscuro had been a hallmark of her portraits throughout the twenties, signifying dramatic specular modernity with its attributes of theatricality, fashion, and film (such as the portrait of the actor *Francis Lederer* or *Russian Dancer* in 1929), it acquired a distinctly melancholic dimension after her arrival in the United States. Jacobi’s portraits recorded the danger of the historical moment and the tragic experiences of her sitters (the portraits of Erich Reiss, Karen Horney, and Max Reinhardt, for example) who found themselves not only biographically and professionally suspended in the geopolitical chasm of exile, but equally, as did Jacobi herself, in the historical shift from the radical bourgeois public sphere of Weimar culture to that of the culture industry of the United States.

While Jacobi’s melancholic chiaroscuro attempted to rescue the subject’s contemplative dimension, Freund’s decision to employ color photography from 1938 onward (the portraits of James Joyce and of French interwar intellectual and artistic “celebrities,” for example) situated the portrait within an altogether different set of relations, signaling the inevitable shift toward the spectacularization of subjectivity. Freund’s color photographs seem involuntarily intertwined with the imminent influx of American technicolor movies and with the full-color advertisements of the *Saturday Evening Post* or *Life* magazine whose chromatic “naturalism” would simulate immediacy, presence and life, promising unlimited access to the universe of dead objects that consumer culture was soon to foist on its postwar subjects.



5 • Lotte Jacobi, *Portrait of Lotte Lenya Weill*, c. 1928

Silver print. 27.6 × 35.6 (10½ × 14)

It is particularly important to trace the development of the Weimar photographers after their emigration either to France (as was the case with Freund and Krull), to the United States (as was the case with Jacobi, Auerbach, and many others), or to Argentina (as in the case of Grete Stern). Bereft not only of their language and culture, but also of the progressive social and political contexts from within which they had emerged (for instance, the context of the Weimar avant-garde—such as the Bauhaus—the emergence of an emancipatory feminist consciousness evident in the radical enactment of the rights of the “New Woman,” and the horizon of an actually existing socialist politics), they now found themselves confronted with totally different definitions of the social functions of photography. On the one hand was an outright and intensified commercialism in the rapidly accelerating consumer culture of the United States where “photography as a weapon” was more thoroughly discredited and censored than one might be able to recollect at this point. On the other hand was a general cultural backlash and a return to the patriarchal supremacy of painting as the centrally governing practice of visual culture (as in Abstract Expressionism), against which photography, shunted from its position at the radical forefront of Weimar culture, could now be relegated to its earlier role as the minor “sister art.” BB

FURTHER READING

- Ellen Auerbach, *Berlin, Tel Aviv, London, New York* (Munich and New York: Prestel Verlag, 1998)
Marion Beckers and Elisabeth Moortgat, *Atelier Lotte Jacobi: Berlin—New York* (Berlin: Nicolai Verlag, 1997)
Christian Caujolle (ed.), *Gisèle Freund: Photographer* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985)
Ute Eskildsen (ed.), *Fotografieren hiess teilnehmen: Fotografinnen der Weimarer Republik* (Essen: Museum Folkwang; and Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1994)
Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women’s Photographers* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994)
Kim Sichel, *Germaine Krull: Photographer of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999)
Kelly Wise, *Lotte Jacobi* (Danbury: Addison House, 1978)

Georges Bataille reviews *L'Art primitif* in *Documents*, making apparent a rift within the avant-garde's relation to primitivism and a deep split within Surrealism.

By the time Georges Bataille (1897–1962)—philosopher, librarian, pornographer, critic, and editor of the dissident Surrealist magazine *Documents* (whom André Breton called Surrealism's “enemy from within”)—decided to address the recently published *L'Art primitif* (Primitive Art) by French psychologist Georges Luquet, “primitivism” was no longer just the private enthusiasm of the avant-garde. In Paris especially, “primitivism” had emerged as spectacle—both at the level of high culture, as in the opera *The Creation of the World* (1923), with tribal costuming and sets by Fernand Léger and music by Darius Milhaud, and (given that the tribal could be updated in the contemporary imagination to include anything “African”) at the lower end of the scale, as in the nightclub performances of Josephine Baker and in the eruption of jazz in Montparnasse bars and clubs. The newfound chic of “primitivism” also meant that tribal motifs were now a part of the world of expensive ornament, with the Art Deco palette of chrome and plastic ▲ expanded to accommodate a taste for ivory, ebony, and zebra skin.

Further, “primitivism,” a term that encompassed both paleolithic and tribal art, was now understood in terms of the development of the human species ontogenetically as well as ethnically. It was the category through which to address the birth of art itself, whether in the caves at the dawn of human creativity or in the modern nursery at the onset of every child’s urge to draw. This is why “primitivism” was now the province of psychologists as well as aestheticians (in his 1928 *Foundations of Art*, the French painter Amédée Ozenfant tried to operate as both). No longer a state of degeneracy or deviance, the •“primitive” was not now restricted to psychiatry but had also become the concern of developmental psychology. It was “Exhibit A” in the study of the evolution of human cognitive thought.

Bringing things down

In his review of *L'Art primitif*, Bataille summarized Luquet’s developmental schema. Motor enthusiasm drives both contemporary child and earliest caveman to produce a random scrawl on paper or wall; empowered by the need to find “form” in the world, the scribbler starts to “recognize” the shapes of objects within this marking; recognition leads to the intention to produce such shapes at will and a primitive mimetic drive thus begins, first

conveying natural objects in a schematic way, finally (at the end of the process) rendering them in a realistic manner.

But Bataille did not agree with Luquet. According to him, it was not Narcissus bending over a pool of water who was to be found in the caves 25,000 years ago but the Minotaur, a raging beast patrolling the dark, vertiginous space of the labyrinth. The child begins to mark, Bataille argues, not out of constructive impulses but from the joy of destruction, the pleasure of dirtying. Far from disappearing, this destructive drive continues into the representational phase, and as it does so it is consistently turned against the draftsman himself as a form of self-mutilation; for, Bataille points out, in the paleolithic caves the human effigy is consistently defaced and deformed, even while animal depictions become more and more assured. Auto-mutilation, the drive toward lowering or debasing the human form, is, then, at the core of art; it is not the law of form (or gestalt) that reveals what took place at art’s beginnings but rather the sway of what Bataille calls the *informe*, the “formless.”

“Informe,” Bataille’s little text on formlessness, appeared early on in the short life of *Documents*. It was part of the “Dictionary” written collectively by members of the *Documents* group over the two-year span of the magazine. Reflexive in nature, the text addressed the very definitions of words. A dictionary, it argued, should give words *jobs* rather than meanings, with the job of the word “formless” being that of undoing the whole system of meaning, itself a matter of form or classification. By declassifying, *formless* would also “de-class” or bring things down in the world (*déclasser*). It would break the back of resemblance—in which a categorical ideal or model is copied, the one always capable of being distinguished from the other—so necessary to the possibility of gathering things together in classes: “To assert that the universe does not resemble anything and is merely formless,” Bataille concludes, “amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.”

The license to shock

Bankrolled by the art dealer Georges Wildenstein, *Documents* was supposed to have been an art magazine. But from the first issue the rubric “Fine Arts” was joined on its cover by those of “Doctrines,”

“Archaeology,” and “Ethnography” (a fifth section, “Variétés,” promising texts on popular culture, replaced “Doctrines” from issue five). In counterdistinction to the aestheticized ethnography that gripped the Surrealist movement by the end of the twenties, the *Documents* notion of the tribal was violently antiaesthetic. The premises of the ethnographers who published in the magazine—Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris, Paul Rivet, Georges-Henri Rivière, André Schaeffner—were antimuseum; they believed that tribal material was meaningless when taken out of context and that, far from being a matter of arresting visual forms, such material concerned a pattern of ritual and daily experience (Griaule wrote on “spitting” as a form of hygiene) that could not be frozen into the world of the vitrine and the gallery.

In adding “spit” to the catalogue of their concerns, the ethnographers could be seen as announcing an affinity with Surrealism’s own defiant posture, its decision to carry a “license to shock.” Indeed, with many former members of the movement having abandoned André Breton for the *Documents* circle—the painter André Masson, the poet Robert Desnos, the photographer Jacques-André Boiffard, to name three—Bataille’s group was itself an alternative form of Surrealism, which the historian James Clifford has called “ethnographic surrealism.” Like the Surrealists with their practice of automatic writing, and like the psychoanalyst in his use of free association, the *Documents* ethnographers demanded that everything should be allowed to surface. Their investigations, scientific in nature, should operate according to the law of no exclusions; they should concern everything in a culture from its highest to its lowest expressions; everything—“even the most formless”—should enter the world of ethnographic classification.

It is exactly at this point, the French critic Denis Hollier has argued, that a rift opens within *Documents* itself. For if its ethnographers thought of themselves as being shocking by attending equally to low and to high, their very act of attention strips the low of its power to shock. This is because theirs is precisely the work of classification, submitting “even the most formless” to the work of resemblance. Yet for Bataille, as we have seen, the “formless” resembles nothing. Lower than low, totally without example, and thus “impossible,” it is that which declassifies. Bataille’s concept of formless thus parts company with that of the ethnographers. “On the one hand,” writes Hollier, “the law of ‘no exception’; on the other, that of an absolute exception, of that which is unique but without properties.”

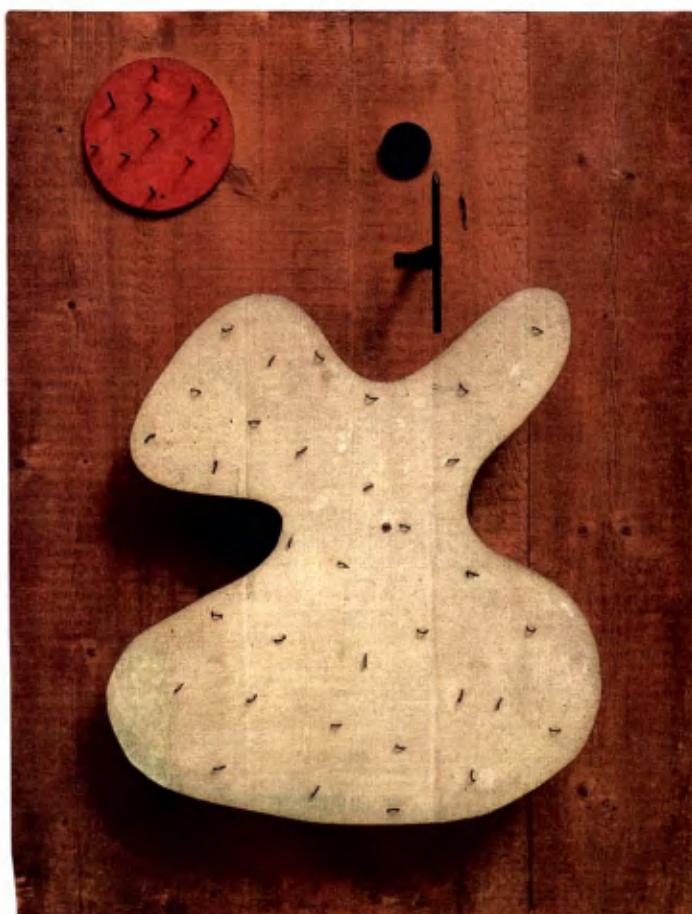
Although he was an ethnographer, the writer Michel Leiris was closer to Bataille in many respects than to Marcel Griaule. His *Phantom Africa* (1934), the account of his participation in Griaule’s 1933 expedition from Dakar to Djibouti (to study the Dogon people), was as much an exercise in personal introspection—dreams, fantasies—as it was objective reportage. Leiris was also close to artists such as Joan Miró and Alberto Giacometti, writing the very first account of the latter’s work for a review in *Documents*. Drawing these artists into Bataille’s orbit, this connec-

tion (documented in Miró’s 1927 painting *Michel [Leiris], Bataille, et moi*) was to prove fateful for both.

Taking Miró at his word when he claimed in 1927 that he wanted to “assassinate” painting, Leiris switched the discourse on ▲ Miró’s dream pictures from Surrealist to formless. Accordingly, in his 1929 essay in *Documents*, he spoke of these works as being “not so much painted as dirtied,” their calligrammatic drawing recoded in his eyes as graffiti. They are, he wrote, “troubling like destroyed buildings, tantalizing like faded walls on which generations of poster-hangers, allied over centuries of drizzle, have inscribed mysterious poems, long smears taking louche shapes, uncertain like alluvial deposits.”

“Like a spider or spit”

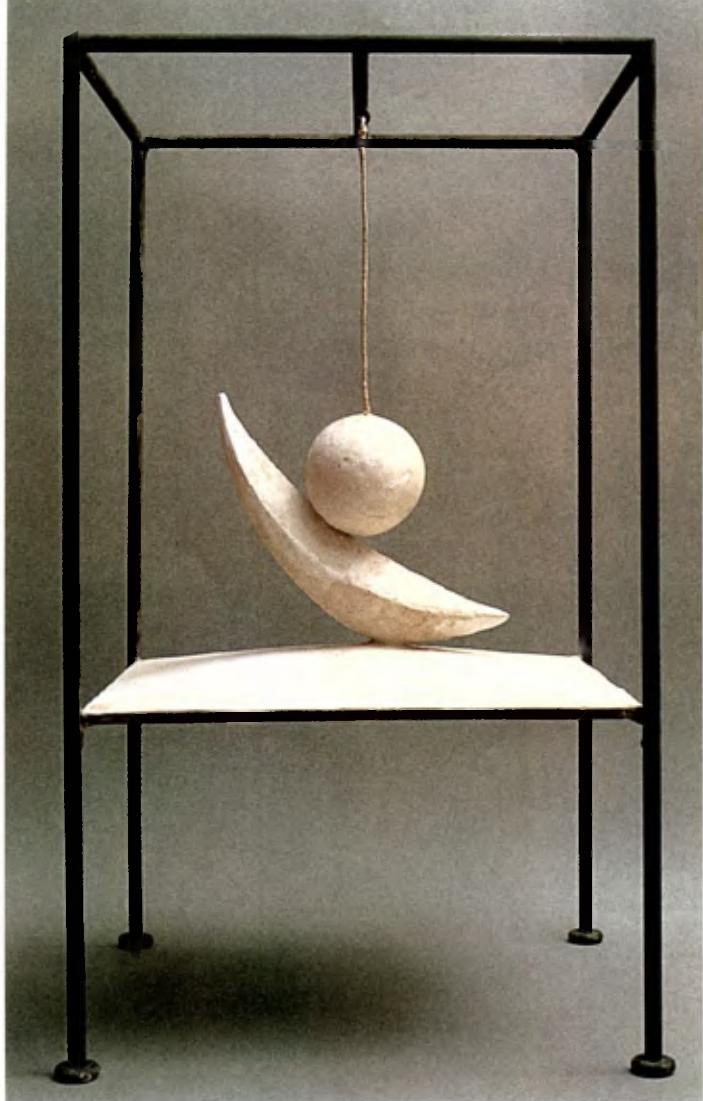
When Bataille also addressed Miró’s art in *Documents*, in 1930, he spoke of it as *informe*. And indeed, during the two years of Miró’s entry into this orbit his rage against painting took the guise of making little constructions of objects picked out of garbage cans, or of working on collages with nails projecting from them [1]. Writing of the few canvases that Miró produced, which the artist termed “antipainting,” Bataille related: “the decomposition was pushed to the point where nothing remained but some formless blotches on the cover (or, if you prefer, on the gravestone) of



1 • Joan Miró, *Relief Construction*, Montroig, August–November 1930
Wood and metal, 91.1 × 70.2 × 16.2 (35 1/2 × 27 1/4 × 6 1/4)

Carl Einstein (1885–1940)

Carl Einstein is best remembered today for being the first author to have discussed African sculptures in aesthetic terms rather than as ethnographic artifacts, in his profusely illustrated and groundbreaking *Negerplastik* (Negro Sculpture) of 1915, which was widely circulated among avant-garde artists of the day. He is also credited with writing the first extensive survey of twentieth-century art—in 1926, when only a quarter of the century in question had passed! But that is just the tip of a large iceberg. An accomplished writer whose modernist novel *Bebuquin* was celebrated in many avant-garde journals soon after its publication in 1912, Einstein was also a cultural critic whose positions were often akin to that of the Frankfurt School, particularly of its most famous members Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Reacting against the traditional formalism of his professor Heinrich Wölfflin, he proposed early on an interpretation of Cubism that, resolutely opposed to its then current apology as an art of synthesis and ideation, stressed instead its heterogeneous nature and its discontinuity. Soon after his arrival in Paris in 1928, he became one of the founders and major contributors of *Documents*, and sided with Georges Bataille in the elaboration of a view of Surrealism that radically dissented from André Breton's official line. A lifelong anarchist militant, he enlisted in the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and returned to France at the victory of General Franco, where he was arrested and interned by the French government until he committed suicide to escape Nazi persecutions.



2 • Alberto Giacometti, *Suspended Ball*, 1930–1 (1965 reconstruction)

Plaster and metal, 61 × 36 × 33.5 (24 × 14½ × 13½)

painting's box of tricks." But one cannot kill off art *and* remain an artist; by 1930–1, Miró, who had practically stopped working, had to choose. His decision was to return to painting, but in a corrosive style that carried over a *Documents* sensibility in its attack on the human body and on "good form."

Giacometti's case is even more telling in regard to the issue of primitivism, since, as a developing sculptor, his attraction to the work of Brancusi led him at first to the kind of aestheticizing primitivism that Bataille and the *Documents* ethnographers abhorred. But through Masson and Leiris he, too, entered the pages of the magazine and soon thereafter into the sensibility of the formless. The first direction this took was an attraction to the theme of the praying mantis, itself an important incarnation of the attack on form. His most achieved production of formlessness was, however, the sculpture called *Suspended Ball*, which, ironically, caused great excitement among the Surrealists when it was first exhibited in 1930 [2].

There, two caged forms—a recumbent wedge and a cloven ball hung, pendulum-like, from a strut at the cage's top—seem to make

contact, as the ball appears to swing, caressingly, over the crescent shape below. This contact seems manifestly sexual since the forms are so genital in appearance. But the deep ambiguity that descends on them makes their gender identification a matter of constant indecision. Vulvalike, the wedge is also coded male, like the phallic knife that slices across the heroine's eye in Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's film *Un Chien d'Andalou* (Andalusian Dog; 1929). Masculine in its active role, the ball's cleft also pronounces it as feminine. And the continual crisscross of this play of identification, itself imitating the metronomic swing of the structure's pendulum, results in just that act of declassifying that Bataille had termed the job of formlessness. The "impossible" condition that emerges in *Suspended Ball* is Hollier's "absolute exception," or what Roland Barthes would call, referring to a similar crossing of gender identifications in Bataille's pornographic novel *The Story of the Eye*, a "round phallicism."

The important lesson that *Suspended Ball* delivers is that the formless is not simply mess or slime. Its cancellation of boundaries is more structural than that since it involves a voiding of categories. Such a voiding is operational, active, like the swing of Giacometti's pendulum, or like the lowering from vertical to horizontal that Bataille invokes in his "Dictionary" definition when he says that the formless will "knock form off its pedestal and bring it down in

the world." Another example of such a lowering or cancellation of the difference between these spatial coordinates is the labyrinthine space of caves, where the axes of reason and of architecture no longer apply. It is from this that Bataille's love of the cave's denizen, the Minotaur, derives. Giacometti's decision in 1930 to orient his sculpture to the horizontal, making it out of nothing but what had formerly been the mere base of sculpture, emerged from this thought of the formless. The breakthrough in the history of modernist sculpture represented by a work like *No More Play* (1933), however, would be understood only in the sixties with a movement such as Earthworks.

That formlessness results from a blurring of categories, rather than from a literal clouding of shape, is once more apparent in two works reproduced in the magazine *Minotaure* (named by Bataille but controlled for the most part by Breton) in the early thirties. One of these, made as a frontispiece for the magazine, displays the Minotaur photographically, with Man Ray lighting his model so as to produce a headless torso whose arms and chest now double as the horns and brow of a bull [3]. Thus collapsing human and animal into a single "impossible" category, the seeming headlessness of the human model further implies the downward pull that goes with a loss of form. The other work, from *Minotaure*'s first issue, is also a photograph, again produced with a great precision that nonetheless yields up categorical blur. This is Brassai's *Nude* [4], in which the female body is transgressively shot so as to project itself unmistakably as phallic, once more collapsing gender distinctions in the manner of *Suspended Ball*.

Minotaure was the site of a sequence of photoconceptual works made in a partnership between Salvador Dalí and Brassai, all of which circle around the formless. *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy* [5], even while organizing the units of the images into a grid (that is, into the structure that announces form's drive toward order and logic), exploits the idea of a fall from vertical to horizontal and a (hysterical) collapse of upper organs (mouth, ear) onto lower ones (vagina, anus). *Involuntary Sculptures* (1933) displays the tiny results of unconscious, masturbatory gestures: bus tickets obsessively rolled in one's pockets, erasers or crusts of bread distractedly kneaded, etc. In the third work, Dalí discusses Hector Guimard's Art Nouveau metro entrances, photographed by Brassai to demonstrate the presence within these forms of the silhouette of the praying mantis.

An embodiment of formlessness as fascinating as the Minotaur itself, the praying mantis received its most brilliant theorization from the pen of Roger Caillois, an ally of Bataille's, who wrote on the creature in the fifth issue of *Minotaure* (1934). Here formlessness moves through the channel of animal mimicry, in which insects camouflage themselves in a form of identification with their surrounding space. In the case of the mantis this takes the guise of "playing dead" as, stock still, it turns itself into a blade of grass. Although blending with the background produces its own type of categorical cancellation, as the difference between figure and ground or that between the interior and the exterior of the



3 • Man Ray, *Minotaur*, 1934

Silver-gelatin print



4 • Brassai, *Nude*, 1933

Silver-gelatin print

organism seems to be erased, the mantis's "playing dead" ratchets this up yet another notch on the scale of the "impossible." For the mantis, often decapitated in its fights with others, is an insect that carries on its living duties regardless—hunting, laying eggs, building nests. Dead, it plays at life. But since among its activities when alive was the defense of playing dead, it is assumed that a dead mantis would do this, too. Thus dead, it plays at life playing at death.

The cancellation of resemblance produces the impossible instance of death playing dead. In another, later lexicon this would be called the *simulacrum*; Bataille called it the formless. RK

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5 • Salvador Dalí, *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*, 1933

Photomontage, dimensions unknown

Alberto Giacometti, Salvador Dalí, and André Breton publish texts on “the object of symbolic function” in the magazine *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*: Surrealism extends its aesthetic of fetishism and fantasy into the realm of object-making.

Two challenges to traditional sculpture came in the form of the tribal artifact, as used by primitivist artists, and the everyday commodity, as used in the Duchampian ready-made. Although they are obviously different, each object seemed to possess or play on a kind of fetishistic power. The tribal artifact evoked the fetish as a ritual object, with a special life or cultic force of its own, while the readymade evoked the fetish as commercial product, the commodity fetish. According to the classic analysis of Karl Marx, capitalist production leads us to forget that commodities are made by human labor, and so we tend to endow these things with an autonomous life or power, to fetishize them in this sense as well. Part of the attraction of the tribal artifact was its very difference from a capitalist economy of commodity exchange, while part of the provocation of the readymade was its implicit demonstration that, despite its often transcendental pretenses, modern art was bound to this same economy—that like any other product it was made primarily for display and sale. With the advent of the Surrealist object, this partial typology of modernist object-making may be extended, for it involves a third kind of fetish, the sexual fetish, and part of its effect was also due to its juxtaposition of different economies of the object.

Ambivalent objects

Consider an object already cited in this book, the little slipper-spoon found by André Breton in a Paris flea market. In his 1937 novel *L'Amour fou* (Mad Love), the object reminds Breton of a phrase, “Cinderella ashtray,” that represents his desire for love—no doubt because of its conjoining of a spoon, a classic Surrealist emblem of woman, with a slipper, a classic sexual fetish. But this wooden spoon, Breton tells us in *L'Amour fou*, was also an object of “peasant fabrication,” a crafted thing made for personal use that was outmoded, literally pushed to the flea market, by the industrial production of mass goods. Thus its service as a sign of a repressed wish or desire may be related to its status as a vestige of a displaced social formation or economic mode. That is, the Surrealist concern with “the uncanny” in subjective life, with familiar images, objects, or events made strange by repression, may be connected to the Marxist concern with “the nonsynchronous” in historical life—with

the uneven development of social relations and productive modes. The very force of Surrealist objects like the slipper-spoon may depend on this connection between subjective and social histories.

“What prepares these products to receive the investment of psychic energy characteristic of their use by Surrealism,” the American critic Fredric Jameson has argued, “is precisely the half-sketched, uneffaced mark of human labor, of the human gestures, on them; they are still frozen gesture, not yet completely separated from subjectivity, and remain therefore potentially as mysterious and expressive as the human body itself.” Here Jameson elaborates on an insight of the German critic Walter Benjamin, who, in his essay “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929), celebrated the Surrealists as “the first to perceive the revolutionary energies in the ‘outmoded,’ in the first iron construction, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct.” To recover such “wish-symbols of the previous century” was, for Benjamin, to redeem these “ruins of the bourgeoisie” as talismans of “dialectical thinking” or “historical awakening.” This “profane illumination” was sometimes sparked by the way that a particular object might set different economies of the object into contradiction.

The first Surrealist object proposed by Breton, in his essay “Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality” (1924), was also seen in a flea market, but only in a dream. This object was a fantastic book, with pages made of black cloth and a wooden spine carved in the form of a gnome—a remainder from an even more exotic time than that of the slipper-spoon. In this early essay, Breton stressed the *unreality* of the Surrealist object, its challenge to “creatures and things of ‘reason’” and use, a definition that he likely extrapolated from a reading of the readymade. But soon Breton shifted to stress the *reality* of the Surrealist object as a sign of desire, which points to an important difference from the readymade. For though the readymade is a found object, it is rarely outmoded and never uncanny in the Surrealist sense; and though it may pun sexually, it is not invested with psychic energy in the same sense either. On the contrary, Duchamp aimed at “visual indifference,” even “complete anaesthesia,” in the readymade, which, unlike the Surrealist object, is “separated from subjectivity” in order that it might challenge this deepest of bourgeois beliefs about the subjective origin of all art.

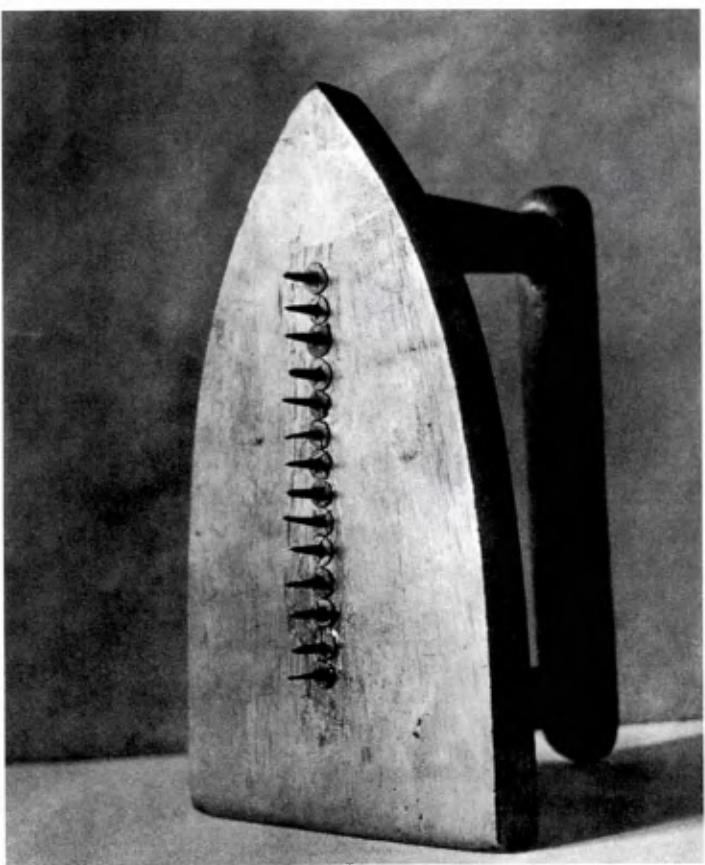
Nonetheless, the Surrealist object derived from the Duchampian ready-made, just as the Surrealist image derived from the Dadaist collage. Indeed, this development was an inaugural act of Surrealism, defined in the first issue of its first magazine *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924) as “any discovery that changes the nature or the destination of an object or a phenomenon.” This transformation is best traced in the work of the American photographer and painter ▲ Man Ray, whose *Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (1920), a photograph of an object said to be a sewing machine, blanketed with burlap and bound in rope, accompanied this definition in the magazine. (Ducasse, known as Lautréamont, was a nineteenth-century poet-hero of the Surrealists, who took his line—“beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table”—as an aesthetic motto.) In his days as a New York Dadaist, Man Ray produced and/or photographed several readymades, some pure, some “assisted”; respective examples of each kind are a simple eggbeater titled *Man* and its counterpart, two hemispherical reflectors divided by a glass pane pinched by six laundry pins, titled *Woman* (both 1918). The sexual puns are intended here, and they point to a transitional work titled *Gift* [1] made during his first Paris show in December 1921 (Man Ray lived in Paris until 1940). On a whim, accompanied by the composer Erik Satie, he purchased a flatiron used on coal stoves, glued a row of fourteen tacks to its bottom (most replicas show nails), and added the object to the exhibition. The sadistic charge, only implicit in the eggbeater and

pins of *Man and Woman*, is explicit here, as the tacks turn the ready-made iron into a proto-Surrealist object. “You can tear a dress to ribbons with it,” Man Ray once remarked of this work, as if to acknowledge that its sadism was directed at women. “I did it once, and asked a beautiful eighteen-year-old colored girl to wear it as she danced,” he added, in a way that suggests how racial fetishism can compound sexual fetishism (as it often does in his work). “Her body showed through as she danced around; it was like a bronze in movement. It was really beautiful.” But if *Gift* were only sadistic, it would not be as effective as it is; what makes it so is its ambivalence, which is twofold. In terms of its address to the viewer, the object is aggressive, but it is designated a gift; as such it literalizes the ambivalence of any present—as both an offering made and a debt incurred—an ambivalence detailed by the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss in his *Essai sur le don* (Essay on the Gift) of 1925. So, too, *Gift* is ambiguous in terms of function (most irons smooth and press; this one gouges and tears) and in terms of gender (most irons are associated with female labor; this one has penile tacks). Placed in contradiction, these aims turn the iron into the artistic equivalent of a symptom or, more exactly, of a fetish, which Freud defined as an object in which conflicted desires converge.

Objects mobile and mute

The Surrealists were among the first modernists to study Freud closely, but they also developed parallel insights, and it is not clear how much they knew of texts such as his 1927 essay on fetishism. For Freud the fetish is a substitute for the penis that the mother lacks. This lack is said to horrify the little boy who discovers it (the ambiguous case of the little girl is scanted), for it threatens him with this “castration” too, and so he turns to penile surrogates, that is, to fetishes, to maintain his fantasy of bodily wholeness, of phallic power. Thus fetishism is a practice of ambivalence in which the male subject both recognizes and disavows castration or any such traumatic loss. This ambivalence may split the subject, to be sure, but it may also split the fetish into an ambivalent object—both “memorial” to castration and “protection” against it. This is why, according to Freud, the fetish often registers both “hostility” and “affection,” and why, apart from all the sexual desire displaced onto it, it is such a fraught thing.

The Surrealists were intrigued by this scenario, which they put into play in images and objects alike. For example, Surrealist photographs of nudes often oscillate between fragmentary parts and fetishistic wholes, in which the female body appears castrated and castrative one moment, only to appear integral and phallic the next. But castration anxiety and fetishistic defense are most focused in Surrealist objects—those by Alberto Giacometti above all others. It is as though some of his objects aim to suspend the castration that defines sexual difference in Freudian theory, or at least to render sexual reference ambiguous (as in *Suspended Ball*); Others seem to disavow this castration fetishistically (such as the two *Disagreeable Objects* [1930–1]), while still others appear to



1 • Man Ray, *Gift*, 1921

Iron, nails, 17 × 10 × 11 (6½ × 3⅓ × 4⅓)

▲ 1918, 1924, 1930b

▲ Introduction 1, 1930b

● 1930b

punish its female representative sadistically (such as the insectoid *Woman with Her Throat Cut* [1932]), with “horror at the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her” (Freud). At least for a few years Giacometti was able to turn the psychic ambivalence in fetishism into a symbolic ambiguity in object-making.

For the December 1931 issue of *Le Surrealisme au service de la révolution*, Giacometti sketched seven objects under the rubric *objets mobiles and muets*. This is a strange designation: it evokes things uncannily alive, mobile with desire but mute with repression. At least five of the objects were subsequently executed, while the other two evoke scenarios of sex and / or sacrifice also characteristic of Giacometti. In the drawing, a hand nearly touches the phallic form, as if to test the taboo against touching the desired thing (whether this be a totem animal, a sexual object, or an art work), that is, as if to point to the complementary relation between desire and prohibition, transgression and law, that structures the ambivalence of these works. Giacometti titled this object “disagreeable,” as he did another one, also pictured in the drawing,

in which the phallic form is cut by a plane; but it is difficult not to hear the word “agreeable” here as well. For both objects are at once “agreeable” as fetishes and “disagreeable” as shapes that nonetheless evoke castration. In its executed form, the first *Disagreeable Object* seems almost animate, an embryonic body with eyes, an object that suggests its own series of ambivalent associations (penis, feces, baby ...) analyzed elsewhere by Freud in terms of objects of feared loss. And recognition of castration does appear to be inscribed here in the form of the spikes: “hostility” for the fetish is indeed mixed with “affection.”

This mixing of the agreeable and the disagreeable, the fetishistic and the castrative, is also at work in the most famous Surrealist object of all, the fur-lined teacup, saucer, and spoon made by the young German-Swiss Surrealist Meret Oppenheim (1913–85) in 1936. Such objects have stories—they are the precipitates of charged narratives—and the story here is this: one day at the Café de Flore in Paris, Oppenheim happened to show Picasso her design for a bracelet lined with fur, to which he replied that anything,



2 • The Galerie Charles Ratton, Paris, at the time of the “Exposition surréaliste d’objets,” in May 1936

"even this cup and saucer," could be so covered (it is telling that by the mid-thirties such objects had already become not merely a genre of art but a style of jewelry). When Breton invited Oppenheim to exhibit in the 1936 "Exposition surréaliste d'objets" at the Galerie Charles Ratton [2], she bought a tea set at a department store and lined each object (including a spoon for good measure) with the fur of a Chinese gazelle. Breton then titled the work *Déjeuner en fourrure* (*Luncheon in Fur*), a fitting homage to the painting by Édouard Manet *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*Luncheon on the Grass*) of 1862–3, as well as to the novel by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch *Venus in Furs* (1870; it was Sacher-Masoch who lent his name to the term "masochism"). For *Déjeuner en fourrure* is a still life-cum-nude, a witty disturbance of teatime propriety through a smutty allusion to female genitalia that plays ambivalently on oral eroticism as well. It also sends up the Freudian fetish, mocks it through excess, as if to fling its masculinist bias in the face of the male viewer. One senses the joy of power reversed in this well-played joke, a Venus in Furs who delights in her sadistic ploy. But the sadistic position, Freud tells us, can quickly turn into its masochistic double, and this reversal is suggested by another fetish contrived by Oppenheim in 1936, *Ma gouvernante—My Nurse—Mein Kindermädchen* [3] (her title implies that fetishism is not specific to gender or language). In his 1927 essay, Freud uses the bound feet of aristocratic women in old China as an example of the mixing of contempt and reverence in the fetish. Here Oppenheim offers us bound white high heels, a classic fetish in any case, turned over and cuffed in twine, an apparent trophy-testimonial of the sadism of men and the masochism of women. But this woman has garnished these heels with tassels and served them up on a silver platter, as if to subvert the sadistic position through sheer delight in the masochistic one; and indeed, in the sadomasochistic contract, the masochist is the person in control.

Lost objects

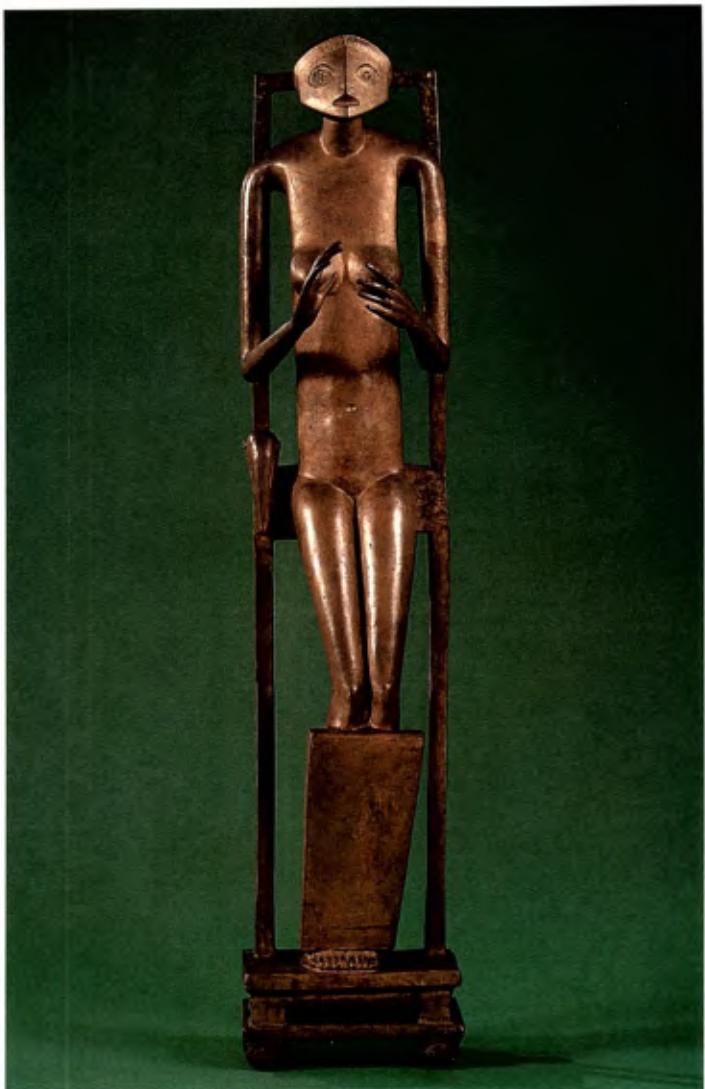
By 1936 the fetish had begun to be a cliché in the hands of Surrealists who seemed to script objects after Freud. Salvador Dalí in particular was chastised by Breton for "the voluntary incorporation" of psychoanalytic interpretation into art in a way that weakened its effect. For Breton this scripting immobilized desire rather than motivated ambivalence, and yet he sought such a fixing, too. For he also held that every desire has a distinctive object, which chance would deliver as punctually as it had his slipper-spoon in the flea market. But the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who was a young associate of the Surrealists, has shown this idea of satisfied desire to be wishful thinking. In his account, need (the need of the infant, say, for maternal milk) can be satisfied, but desire (the desire of the infant, say, for the absent breast) cannot be satisfied, for its object is precisely lost (desire would not arise otherwise) and can only be re-created in fantasy. On the one hand, then, as Freud remarked, "the finding of a [sexual] object is in fact a refinding of it." On the other hand, as



3 • Meret Oppenheim, *Ma gouvernante—My Nurse—Mein Kindermädchen*, 1936
Metal, paper, shoes, and string, 14 × 21 × 33 (5½ × 8¼ × 13)

Lacan suggested, this refinding is forever a seeking: the object cannot be regained because it is phantasmatic, and desire cannot be satisfied because it is defined in lack. From this perspective, the Surrealist object is impossible in a way that most Surrealists never grasped, for they continued to insist on its discovery—on an object adequate to desire.

This confusion also comes into focus in the flea-market episode ▲ of the slipper-spoon, where Breton recounts how Giacometti made *Invisible Object* (*Hands Holding the Void*), otherwise known as *Feminine Personage* [4]. This figure was born of a romantic crisis, Breton tells us, and Giacometti had trouble with the hands, the head, and, implicitly, the breasts, which he resolved only when he discovered a strange helmet-mask at the market. For Breton this is a textbook case of a perfect match between desire and object. But in fact *Invisible Object* evokes the opposite condition, the impossibility of the lost object regained. With its cupped hands and blank stare, this feminine personage shapes "the invisible object" in its very absence; such is the eerie pathos of this alienated supplicant. In this way the Surrealist object is not only a fetish that covers



4 • Alberto Giacometti, *Invisible Object (Hands Holding the Void)*, 1934

Bronze, 153 × 32 × 29 (60½ × 12½ × 11¾)



5 • Joseph Cornell, *Soap Bubble Set*, 1947-8

Construction, 32.4 × 47.3 × 7.6 (12½ × 18½ × 3)

up a lack; it is also a figure of this lack, an analogue of the lost object keyed to the maternal breast, as the invisible object is keyed here. We arrive, then, at this paradoxical formula of the found object in Surrealism: a lost object, it is never recovered but forever sought; always a substitute, it drives on its own search.

Faced with this difficulty, Giacometti turned back from traumatic fantasy to mimetic representation as the source of his art: ▲ "I worked with the model all day from 1935 to 1940." Yet, charged by fetishistic ambivalence, his Surrealist objects of the early thirties remain the high point of this practice. Too often in other hands these tableaux of "mobile and mute objects" became tabulations of inert and talky things. For example, in the same issue of *Le Surrealisme au service de la révolution* Dali presented a tabulation of Surrealist objects that attempts to be absurd (he lists objects as "transubstantiated," "projected," "wrapped," and so on), to derange any order of things. But a "table" remains beneath such tabulations to arrange them, just as a table remains to support the "chance encounter of a sewing machine and the umbrella" in the line from Lautréamont. Often this table is one of display—many Surrealist objects appear in boxes or vitrines—and this display is not so alien to modes of exhibition in a gallery or indeed in a store. The objects in the celebrated 1936 show of Surrealist objects have circled back in this way to a setting like a flea market: these once-strange fetishes have once again become bric-à-brac for sale.

The Surrealist theater of fantasy was developed most effectively by the American Joseph Cornell (1903–72). Modeled on old dovecotes, slot machines, and the like, his boxes adapt the cage and gameboard models of Giacometti, and they often mix the uncanny and the outmoded in Surrealist fashion. But even as these "philosophical toys" create an aesthetics of wonder—dream spaces where sand and stars, or soap bubbles and moon maps, seem to touch [5]—they amuse more than amaze. So too, even as they deal with loss, they smooth it over nostalgically more than activate it traumatically. Thus, however disparate his objects, Cornell allows subjectivity to cohere through the medium of memory. And although desire courses through some of his boxes (several are titled "hotel," and a few are posted with glamorous stars), in other boxes this desire often seems solitary and onanistic, and sometimes disconnected and dead (several are titled "museum," and a few hold stuffed birds). Here the Surrealist object arrives at another destination—not a display where disagreeable objects have become agreeable knickknacks, but a reliquary where the subject haunts its desire like a ghost. HF

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1931_b

As Joan Miró reaffirms his vow to “assassinate painting” and Alexander Calder’s delicate mobiles are replaced by the stolid stabiles, European painting and sculpture display a new sensibility that reflects Georges Bataille’s concept of the “formless.”

In “Surrealism and Painting,” his magisterial four-part survey of the art fundamental to the Surrealist project, published in *La Révolution surréaliste* between 1926 and 1928, André Breton acknowledged the centrality of both Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró for the cultural presence of the movement. For Breton, Miró was both the naive, childlike artist (spattering; nursery images; finger painting) and, at the same time, the consummate formalist, “giving himself up utterly to painting, and to painting alone.” “Painting and painting alone” acknowledges the transparent blue veils of the Mirós of the mid-twenties, often called “dream paintings”—their evanescent backgrounds a spontaneity of spills and liquid washes, their drawing the finest of webs, so as not to interrupt the luminous atmosphere with graphic compartments that would dam the flow. This desire to avoid the interruptive contours of solid figures led Miró to “draw” on his canvases in spidery writing. As with the *calligramme*, invented by Guillaume Apollinaire, the task of “reading” these pictures disrupts and buries that of “seeing.”

By 1927, calligrammatic paintings had moved to the center of Miró’s work, as he wrote phrases or poems over the translucent grounds: *Étoiles en des sexes d’escargots* (Stars in the shape of snails’ sexual organs); *Le Corps de ma brune* (My brunette’s body); *Un oiseau poursuit une abeille et la baisse* (A bird chases a bee and kisses it). The term “dream painting” derives from a raw-canvas work with a blue splotch near its center, under which, in calligrammatic fashion, is written *ceci est la couleur de mes rêves* (“this is the color of my dreams”) [1].

The product of a Catalan painter fascinated by the landscape of northern Spain, Miró’s earliest paintings are haunted by the presence of a horizon line separating field from sky. It is not surprising, then, that in his later drive to acknowledge the surface and structure of painting formally, Miró would bisect the canvas in such works as *Catalan Peasant* [2], not only producing the cross-axial arrangement of a Catalan figure transecting a horizon line, but also making the cruciform armature a reference to the oblong

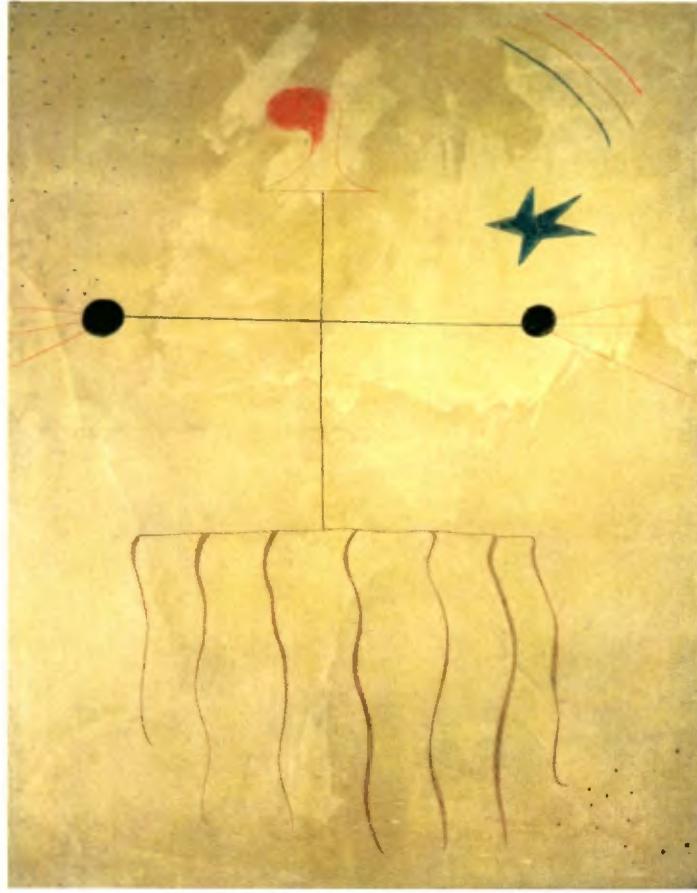
1 • Joan Miró, *Photo – ceci est la couleur de mes rêves*, Montroig, July–September 1925
Oil on canvas, 96.5 × 129.5 (38 × 51)



frame of the picture (a schematized version of the Cubist grid). In an untitled painting of 1925, the entirely blue wash of the ground thickens slightly to indicate the same presence of the “horizon”—but the only “figure” against this azure ground is a tiny white dot in the upper left corner, like a star appearing against a midnight sky.

These and other “dream paintings” from the twenties are indeed marked by a luminous, dreamlike quality, and a light, seemingly automatic spontaneity that suggests that what the works provide is a transparent “window” onto the sleeping unconscious. *The Birth of the World* of 1925 [3], for example, can be likened to the freely made ▲dripped whorls of Jackson Pollock in the late forties, abstract and monumental yet incandescent; while the canvas’s spontaneous runs of color testifying to the rapidity of its execution resemble those of Abstract Expressionist painters such as Arshile Gorky and •Willem de Kooning working at the same time. But by this point, in the forties, Miró’s “dream paintings” had become methodical, deliberate, even if they remained “childlike.” The very name *Constellations*, for a series in the early part of the decade, reminds the viewer of the earlier nocturnal skies, even though the playful shapes of the constellations are opaque, with eyes that seem to challenge the viewer. (These motifs presage Miró’s later work, in which the misty surfaces are punctuated by colorful cartoon characters surrounded by the familiar language of stars and exclamation points.)

Between the delicate luminosity of the “dream paintings” and the formal clarity of the *Constellations* came a series of works that Miró created after he had proclaimed his desire to “assassinate painting,” an abrupt and surprising determination he made first in 1927 and repeated in a 1929 letter to his friend Michel Leiris, and then again, forcefully, in an interview with Madrid journalist Francesco Melgar in 1931. As visually seductive as the “dream paintings” are, the collages that followed, such as *Head of Georges Auric* of 1929 and *Rope and People I* from 1935 [4], assault the eye. Incorporating coarse sandpaper and aggressively twisted rope, they repudiate the delicacy of the twenties. The corrosive tactility of sandpaper is far from the nocturnal atmosphere of the blue paintings; in addition, the violence associated with the heavy rope disrupts the luminous “dream,” both disturbances tolling a death knell to the *visual* at the heart of painting. Declaring them “anti-paintings,” Miró acknowledged the way the new collages tore apart the formal coordination of figure and frame through which his “dream paintings” had enacted their allegiance to pictorial structure. The first thing he disavowed in his letter to Leiris was color: “The charm and music of colors [are] the final stage of degeneration,” he wrote, adding, “This is hardly painting, but I don’t give a damn.” In his 1931 interview, he explained, “I was painting with an absolute contempt for painting.... I was feeling aggressive but at the same time I was feeling superior ... I felt contempt for my oeuvre.”



2 • Joan Miró, *Head of a Catalan Peasant I*, Montroig, Summer–Autumn 1924
Oil on canvas, 146 × 114.2 (57½ × 45)



3 • Joan Miró, *The Birth of the World*, Montroig, late Summer–Autumn 1925
Oil on canvas, 250.8 × 200 (98¾ × 78¾)



4 • Joan Miró, *Rope and People I*, Barcelona, March 27, 1930

Oil on cardboard mounted on wood, with coil of rope, 104.7 x 74.6 (41 1/4 x 29 1/2)

Down in the world

Miró's transformation from dream to antipaintings coincided with his defection from the Surrealist orbit to join the group gathered around Georges Bataille, the editor of the avant-garde journal *Documents* and the man Breton resented as Surrealism's "enemy from within." This enemy not only lured away some of the most important members of Breton's coterie (Artaud, Masson, Soupault, Limbour, Leiris, and Miró himself), but also produced the pornographic work that was as far as possible from Breton's notion of "convulsive beauty": the novel *L'Histoire de l'oeil* (The Story of the Eye), published in 1928, which Roland Barthes characterized as producing a "round phallicism," thus standing as a pornographic book that trades in the impossible cancellation of the difference between man and woman.

It was Bataille who coined the term *l'informe*, a concept developed in *Documents* that celebrated the blurring of distinctions, such as the visual differentiation of figure from ground, inside from outside, or anatomical differences: male from female; head from toe; hand from foot—the very differences on which formal or semantic order depends. He added that his concept was about not only declassifying, but also declassing: "knocking things off their pedestals," as he put it, "and bringing them down in the world."

"Down in the world" certainly characterizes the Miró that Bataille reproduced in *Documents* for his 1930 article on the artist. The works he chose replace the formal clarity of the early "dream paintings" with the newer "antipaintings," one of them a flaccid face in profile surrounded by graffiti-like scrawls from 1930, another a sexually explicit couple of the same year. In familiar fashion, Bataille celebrated the antipaintings as so many wreaths placed "on the gravestones of painting's box of tricks."

Shortly after Bataille's essay on his work, Miró began a series of drawings depicting shapeless creatures with enormous toes sprouting from their sides. More specific than the general concept *l'informe*, the prominence of the toes seems to acknowledge Bataille's essay "The Big Toe," published in *Documents* in 1929. Bataille begins by counterintuitively claiming that "the big toe is the most *human* part of the human body." This, he explains, is because the toe has stopped being prehensile, like the toes of gorillas or apes, such that, instead of clinging to vines so as to swing over the Earth, its newfound rigidity allows the human biped "to raise himself straight up in the air," hence giving "a firm foundation" to the erectness of the human form. The big toe is thus a hinge between rising and grounding, its lowered condition being *not* only its dirtiness but its deformation by corns and bunions. The foot is therefore abased, disgusting. But it is also seductive, a sexual fetish. Bataille ends the essay with "A return to reality ... means that one is seduced in a base manner, without transpositions and to the point of screaming, opening his eyes wide: opening them wide, then, before a big toe."

In his 1972 essay "Outcomes of the Text," Barthes weaves the counterlogic of formlessness into the rest of Bataille's attack on classification, which is so insistently at work in "The Big Toe." The human body's meaning depends on the anatomical oppositions not only between man and woman or head and toe, but also mouth and anus (Barthes takes advantage of the fact that in French, *sens* translates as both "meaning" and "direction"). "Where does the body begin?", Bataille opens his little article "Mouth." Man has a prow, he wrote, like a ship organized along the horizontal axis that separates masthead from stern, or the human body along the axis of mouth to anus. Barthes cautions the reader against understanding Bataille's arguments as psychoanalytical (collapsing the aggressiveness of the toe into a mere fetish). Psychoanalysis gives *meaning* to the human anatomy: the body organized according to erogenous or libidinal zones whose *meaning* produces infantile development; Bataille's insistence on the *low* works against these classifications, as when a tennis player "wrong foots" his opponent by hitting the ball behind him (the French term is *déjouer*).

Miró's new association with the *Documents* group thus makes it unsurprising that he would fill a sketchbook in the mid-thirties with figures sporting monstrous toes, as well as producing the sexually explicit *Woman in Revolt* of 1938, conceived as if in demonstration of Bataille's disruption of the *meaning* of the human anatomy. The woman's leg extends directly from her belly and feminine sexual organ only to terminate in the toe rendered as an enormous phallus.



5 • Alexander Calder, *Mercury Fountain*, 1937

Steel rod, sheet steel surfaced with pitch, mercury, height 259 (102)



6 • Alexander Calder, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, c. 1945

Painted sheet metal, 88.9 x 68.6 x 29.2 (35 x 27 x 11 1/2)

Toward the formless in sculpture

Miró was joined in this descent toward the low and *l'informe* by his friend the American sculptor Alexander Calder, whose work of the twenties was similarly playful and intuitive (he wrought a miniature group of animals and jugglers out of twisted wire), but also weightlessly transparent, as though the bronze cast or wooden block of traditional sculpture would weigh his invention down. The airborne cascades of floating color developed in the works of the early thirties, received enthusiastically as "mobiles," thus linked hands with the "dream paintings" in a seemingly light-spirited parallel. Further, the mobiles' affinity with El Lissitzky's *Proun* paintings, in which polygonal shapes buoyantly hover above a gridded ground, indicates Calder's drive to make the waves of his weblike struts imply a set of organized, even if virtual, volumes.

But Calder was soon to "assassinate" his own joyous inventions when, in *Mercury Fountain* of 1937 [5], poisonous metal sluiced over the channels of his sculpture's recumbent armature in a defiant response to the murderous, fascist war in Spain. It was the Spanish government that had asked Calder to contribute this work for the International Exhibition in Paris, to build a fountain in which mercury flowed, rather than water, since the Republicans wanted to highlight their stand against Franco's siege of the Almaden region of Spain, which supplied more than sixty percent of the world's mercury. These mercury mines served as a symbol of the country's national pride. *Mercury Fountain*, Calder's first major commission, and a popular attraction at the exposition, was installed near Picasso's *Guernica*, laying before the Picasso as if paying homage to its shriek of protest. On the floor above, Miró added his own recent change of tone to the triumvirate's response to the ominous politics of thirties Europe with his mural-sized *The Reaper* (also known as *The Catalan Peasant in Revolt*).

The new solidity of *Mercury Fountain* issued into the large-scale public monuments Calder then went on to fashion. Brushing aside the mobile visual vocabulary, these hulking behemoths—more like dinosaurs or giant reptiles—acquired the name "stabiles" (courtesy of Hans Arp) [6]. Whereas his mobiles had addressed the intimacy of the home, in which they floated (even in cheap unauthorized reproductions) over dining table or crib, the transformation to the stable's ponderous immobility might be seen as an anxious withdrawal from privacy in an imperative to gather civic populations around the symbolic fora of city hall or public space. Perched on civic plazas or city squares, these unexpected, incongruous orange forms received an enthusiastic reception from the public. One, *La Grande Vitesse*, became a municipal logo, embossed on official stationery and—even stranger—on urban garbage trucks in Grand Rapids, Michigan, whose population took this exact pride in their stable [7].

Perhaps the positive popular reception of the stabiles was in part because of their apparent celebration of heavy industrial production, their planes and phalanges bolted together like architectural beams or the struts of bridges. To contemporary critical sensibilities,

▲ 1926, 1955b

● 1937a, 1937c



7 • Alexander Calder, *La Grande Vitesse*, 1969

Painted steel plate, width 1676.4 (660)

however, this heaviness is exactly what rendered them reactionary, ▲ since earlier, Cubist constructed sculpture had evolved a style of open, suggestive forms through which space could circulate. Evolving out of this collage-based vocabulary, Julio González fashioned iron constructions in the thirties, which he dubbed “drawing ● in space.” It was David Smith who revised the stolid opacity of the stabiles with the luminous surfaces of his monumental series of *Cubis*—stainless steel corrosively polished to shimmer in the sun. ■ Thinking of the *Cubis*, Constructivism, and Bauhaus design, Clement Greenberg celebrated the new sculptures’ rejection of opacity, and welcomed the way new technology, with its use of transparent Lucite and its open steel armatures, released forms into what he called “the continuity and neutrality of a space which light alone inflects, without regard to the laws of gravity.” In this, Greenberg saw abstract sculpture adopting a form of opticality that “brings anti-illusionism full circle.” Now, he concluded, “instead of the illusion of things, we are offered the illusion of modalities: namely that matter is incorporeal, weightless, and exists only optically like a mirage.”

A screaming fall

In the parallel being drawn here between Miró’s and Calder’s evolution in the thirties, one might think of the stabiles as something fallen, expressively inert—the buoyant mobiles fixated on the ground. If the mobiles’ transparency and color had addressed

the erectness of the human body, with the plane of the eyes riding atop the upright skeleton, this relates more to the analysis of Sigmund Freud than of Bataille. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, published in 1930, Freud addresses the decisive moment when humans stood up, their newfound erectness liberating their perceptual organs, such as their eyes, from the horizontality of the animal, whose heightened olfactory sense is a function of its orientation to the ground as it paws and sniffs after its partner. Through the distance it entails between subject and object, this newly autonomous visual sense, Freud argues, suddenly frees man to experience Beauty. The separation of the subject from his prey institutes a distance that overcomes the libidinal imperative of the sexual organ, elevating the body, sublimating the subject’s senses. Indeed, for Freud, the very possibility of Beauty is a function of the human’s upright liberation from the ground. Miró’s luminous “dream paintings” and Calder’s diaphanous mobiles had addressed the human subject’s elevation, securing this *visual* experience, this transcendence of the grounded viewer. Their “antipaintings” and stabiles, however, reflected a new interest, following Bataille’s formlessness, in degradation and abasement.

Nothing captures the attack on painting’s commitment to *form* better than Bataille’s essay “Rotten Sun,” written for the 1930 issue of *Documents* in homage to Picasso. Like the argument of “The Big Toe,” Bataille’s little text stresses the question of elevation by calling the sun the “most abstract object.” Its abstraction derives, he wrote, from the impossibility of staring at the sun directly. Such

fixation, he adds, causes madness, "because it is no longer production that appears in light, but *refuse* or combustion, adequately expressed by the horror emanating from a brilliant arc lamp. In practice," Bataille continues, "the scrutinized sun can be identified with a mental ejaculation, foam on the lips, and an epileptic crisis." He goes further in another essay, "The Pineal Eye," in which he wants to project the body, "drunk with the sun" into a "sickening despair of vertigo." Further, the presence of the pineal eye's fascination with the sun manifests itself through a violent eruption that would decapitate the body itself. As Bataille conceives it, "the sun has been mythologically expressed by a man slashing his own throat, as well as by an anthropomorphic being *deprived of a head*." He associates the vertiginous, decapitated body with Icarus, whose "aspiration towards ascent only led to his 'screaming fall.'"

Bataille's readers could hardly imagine a Picasso who would traffic in an epileptic "foam on the lips." Equally, for us today, thinking about Picasso as we do, it is puzzling to conceive his work through the image of the body's transformation of "itself into a vertiginous fall in celestial space, accompanied by a horrible cry,"

as Bataille put it. But in two paintings from 1929, *The Swimmer* and *Nude Standing by the Sea*, Picasso does indeed portray the vertiginous body in a vortex as—practically headless—it spins from high to low. "Rotten Sun" was illustrated by neither of these, but, instead, by the great 1925 painting *The Three Dancers* [8]. Bataille's choice of the work to accompany his text is especially suggestive. The leftmost dancer appears daemonic, a Maenad, as the terrible grimace on her face, atop a body collapsing towards the ground, echoes the gaping hole in her chest as if signaling an eruption—indeed, as if projecting *outside the self* a part of oneself. Nothing could accord more aptly with "projecting outside the self a part of oneself" than automutilation: biting off a finger (as in one psychiatric case that Bataille cites) or cutting off an ear (as in the notorious instance of Vincent van Gogh). In both of these cases, the practice of staring directly at the sun was diagnosed as a symptom of an incurable madness. Bataille links this madness to a stupefaction in the viewer by the sun's dazzling elevation, as of that of a god, to which men are driven to offer a sacrifice. This spirit of sacrifice, Bataille writes, "of which the automutilation of madmen is only the most absurd and terrible example [then demands] the rupture of personal homogeneity."

In the thirties, the very moment of "Rotten Sun," Picasso turned from Cubism to an imitation of Old Master art, with drawings celebrating Ingres and paintings modeled on Velázquez or Delacroix. It is not surprising that Bataille would dismiss as "academic" such a return to classicism, with its implication of balance and its move in direct opposition to the madness and vertigo of the "rotten sun." Indeed, Bataille is aware not only of the received ideas that his treatment of Picasso violates, but also of the dangers of applying his own theoretical categories to works of art: "It would be ridiculous," he warns, "to try to determine the precise equivalents for such movements in an activity as complex as painting." Nonetheless, Picasso's work seems to stand for what Bataille understands as the dominant spirit of the art of his time. He ends "Rotten Sun" by perversely exulting: "In contemporary painting, however, the search *for* that which most ruptures elevation, and *for* a blinding brilliance, has a share in the elaboration or in the decomposition of forms, though strictly speaking this is only noticeable in the paintings of Picasso." RK

FURTHER READING

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- Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997)
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- Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006)
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7 • Pablo Picasso, *The Three Dancers*, 1925

Oil on canvas, 215.3 × 142.2 (84^{13/16} × 56)

Scandal breaks out over the portrait of Lenin by Diego Rivera in the murals for the Rockefeller Center: the Mexican mural movement produces public political mural work in various American locations and establishes a precedent for political avant-garde art in the United States.

The Mexican mural movement was a state-sponsored, ideologically driven avant-garde of the twenties and thirties whose primary goal was to reclaim and re-create a Mexican identity based on Mexico's precolonial past. Diego María Rivera (1886–1957), David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974), and José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949) exerted an enormous influence not only in their native Mexico but also internationally, especially in the United States.

The movement emerged at the end of the Agrarian Revolution of 1910–20, which pitted peasants, intellectuals, and artists against dictator Porfirio Díaz and the big landowners and foreign investors he supported. After ten years of civil war, the inauguration in 1920 of President Alvaro Obregón, a former revolutionary leader, reformist, and art lover, ushered in a period of hope and optimism. This Mexican renaissance was greatly assisted by the philosophical idealism of the Minister of Education, José Vasconcelos, who believed passionately that public art could be a vital component in his mission to educate and enthuse the public and garner support for the new government. It was Vasconcelos who initiated the government's mural program, making him, in a very real sense, the founder of the movement. Vasconcelos and the postrevolutionary government hoped that by collaborating with artists on cultural reforms, the Mexican people would be empowered to participate in the development of the nation and the creation of a new national, cultural and intellectual identity. Vasconcelos and most of the artists involved in the mural movement believed that this could be best achieved by drawing on their shared heritage rather than on the colonial past which had divided them.

Artists thrilled to the challenge of creating a new national art and cultural identity, and many returned to, or visited, Mexico to take part. One of the first was French-born part-Mexican Jean Charlot (1898–1979), who explained how the choice of style and subject all had social and political significance for Mexican artists:

Divergent points of view in aesthetic matters contribute substantially to the pulling apart of Mexico's social classes. The Indian preserves and practices pre-Hispanic art. The middle class preserves and practices a European art qualified by the pre-Hispanic or Indian. The so-called aristocratic class claims its art to be pure European.... When native and middle class share one

criterion where art is concerned, we shall be culturally redeemed, and national art, one of the solid bases of national consciousness, will become a fact.

Vasconcelos did not stipulate any particular style or subject matter, but most of the muralists adopted a mode of nationalist social realism, which drew on pre-Hispanic art forms and featured Mexican heroes and people. A respect for native traditions and popular history informed their art, as did an exploration of their Indian background. This did not, however, preclude an engagement with European modernism, for the new generation wanted to create a new, national art that was at once independent, socially committed, populist, and avant-garde. The quest also involved being able to communicate these revolutionary ideals to a largely illiterate audience in order to carry them along.

Important precursors of the mural movement included the painters Francisco Goitia (1882–1960) and Saturnino Herrán (1887–1918), who early in the century were beginning to develop a specifically Mexican art through their powerful, often tragic, scenes of the indigenous Indian population and events in Mexican history. The satirical caricatures and often harsh propagandist images for newspapers and prints of engraver José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913) were a major influence on many of the future muralists, including Rivera and Orozco, for their style and content and their existence as a genuinely popular art form [1]. Another important figure was the artist Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo Cornado, 1875–1964). As a teacher at the Academy of San Carlos, he inflamed his students with his revolutionary ideals, his anticolonialism, and his fervent belief in the necessity of creating a national, modern art in Mexico that incorporated the "spiritual" qualities of Renaissance frescoes.

To these Mexican influences were added those of the Italian Renaissance and an awareness of Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Postimpressionism, Surrealism, the neoclassicism then sweeping through Europe, and the ideas of Marx and Lenin. Rivera, for instance, spent the years of the revolution in Europe, mostly in Paris, absorbing the various avant-garde developments. Siqueiros met up with Rivera in Paris in 1919: they discussed the revolution, modern art and the need to transform Mexican art with a social art movement.

In 1920, Vasconcelos, then Rector of the University of Mexico, suggested to Rivera that he go to Italy to study the art of the Renaissance, hoping that this might provide the genesis of an art suitable for postrevolutionary Mexico. Rivera spent the next seventeen months studying the work of Giotto, Uccello, Mantegna, Piero della Francesca, and Michelangelo, among others. The epic scale of Italian Renaissance religious art and its power to educate and awe illiterate masses was to be an important example for those who would shortly become the Mexican muralists.

Vasconcelos's mural program was launched in 1921, and at his request, Rivera returned to Mexico to take part. In the same year, Siqueiros published his "Manifesto to the Artists of America" in the sole issue of *Vida Americana*. In it he proclaimed that they should "create a monumental and heroic art, a human and public art, with the direct and living example of our great masters and the extraordinary cultures of pre-Hispanic America." Early in 1922, Rivera began work on his first mural commission at the Amphitheater Bolívar of the National Preparatory School in Mexico City and joined the Communist Party. In September, Siqueiros returned to Mexico, joined the Communist Party, and with the support of Orozco, he and Rivera helped found the Union of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors. In 1923, Siqueiros and Orozco received their first mural commissions, also for the National Preparatory School [1].

Under the auspices of the new Union, Siqueiros formulated a new manifesto which outlined the revolutionary ideology of the fledgling mural movement. Signed by a majority of the mural artists, it was published in 1924. Echoing the language of the Soviet ▲ Constructivists, "A Declaration of Social, Political, and Aesthetic Principles" proclaimed:

We repudiate so-called easel painting ... because it is aristocratic, and we praise monumental art in all its forms, because it is public property ... art must no longer be the expression of individual satisfaction which it is today, but should aim to become a fighting, educative art for all.

This manifesto crystallized the principles of the mural movement and helped define it as a public, ideologically driven, didactic art. Although broadly speaking, the muralists worked in a figurative social realist style, this did not prevent them from developing highly individualistic forms of expression. By the mid-twenties, "The Big Three" had developed their distinctive revolutionary styles and subject matter.

Rivera created figure- and event-packed compositions dealing with both traditional and modern subject matter intended to inspire a sense of pride in his audience's Mexican heritage and proclaim a better future through socialism. He worked in a flat, decorative style with simplified forms, using both stylized figures as well as realistic, identifiable characters to tell his stories. His most ambitious project was *History of Mexico* for the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City, begun in 1929 and left unfinished at his death [2]. In two parts, "From the Pre-Hispanic Civilization to the Conquest" and "From the Conquest to the Future," he told the tale of Mexico's



1 • José Clemente Orozco, *The Trench*, 1926
Fresco, National Preparatory School, Mexico City

history beginning with the fall of Teotihuacán (around AD 900) and ending with Karl Marx leading the way to an ideal future.

Throughout his career, Siqueiros experimented with a variety of techniques and materials in his bold, turbulent, dynamic murals. His work has strongly Surrealist elements, using multiple perspectives, distortion, vibrant colors, and a mixture of realism and fantasy to express the raw power of the workers' universal struggle [3]. For his part, Orozco chose to convey the horrible human suffering of the downtrodden in a heartfelt, and often harrowing Expressionistic social realism, as seen in his murals for the National Preparatory School.

The Mexican muralists in the United States

The work of the three, particularly Rivera, was also beginning to attract attention from across the border. From the mid-twenties on, their work began to be featured in newspapers and the art press, and artists and intellectuals began to make the journey to Mexico to see them at work. They also began to be exhibited in New York, and in 1929 *The Frescoes of Diego Rivera* by Ernestine Evans was published, the first book on his work in English.

This attention soon led to commissions for all three in the United States, which brought their work to an even greater audience. Orozco painted frescoes at the New School for Social Research in New York from 1930–1, at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire from 1932–4, where he also taught the techniques of



2 • Diego Rivera, *History of Mexico: From the Conquest to the Future*, 1929–35

Fresco, south wall, National Palace, Mexico City



3 • David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, 1939–40

Pyroxaline on cement, Mexican Electricians' Syndicate, Mexico City

fresco painting, and at Pomona College in Claremont, California in 1939. In 1932, Siqueiros accepted an invitation to teach at the Chouinard School of Art in Los Angeles and while there completed murals for the school and the Plaza Art Center. In 1935–6 he opened an experimental workshop in New York. Announcing it as “a laboratory of modern techniques,” he taught the use of innovative materials, tools, and techniques, such as throwing, dripping, and spraying. Significantly, the future Abstract Expressionist ▲ painter Jackson Pollock was a member of the workshop.

While Orozco and Siqueiros made an impact through their work and teaching, it was Rivera’s work in the United States that was most noticed. In 1930 and 1931 he had exhibitions in San Francisco and Detroit and executed murals for the California Stock Exchange and the California School of Fine Arts, also receiving a commission to paint murals for the Detroit Institute of Arts. More spectacularly, in December 1931 Rivera was given the second ● retrospective in the new Museum of Modern Art in New York (the first, earlier in the year, had been devoted to Matisse). The exhibition was a critical and popular success, with record attendance figures: almost 57,000 people were exposed to his Mexican-themed work and introduced to the new subject he was exploring—the modern industrial landscape of twentieth-century North America.

Rivera also turned his gaze onto the contemporary American scene in his murals for Detroit (*Detroit Industry*, 1932–3). The introduction of American themes and social commentary in his work provided an important catalyst for American Regionalists such as Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975), and social realists, such as Ben Shahn (1898–1969). As Benton commented later:

I saw in the Mexican effort a profound and much-needed redirection of art towards its ancient humanistic functions. The Mexican concern with publicly significant meanings and with the pageant of Mexican national life corresponded perfectly with what I had in mind for art in the United States. I also looked with envy on the opportunities given Mexican painters for public mural work.

In October of 1932 Rivera, Catalan muralist José María Sert (1876–1945) and the English artist Frank Brangwyn (1867–1956) were commissioned by the Rockefeller family to produce nine murals for the lobby of the RCA Building in the Rockefeller Center in New York. The oil family was one of the richest in the world, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was seen by many as the ultimate manifestation of American capitalism. Rockefeller’s wife, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller was one of the founders of the Museum of Modern Art and they were already collectors of Rivera’s work, having bought his sketchbook of the 1928 May Day parade in Moscow in 1931.

The title of Rivera’s mural was *Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a Better Future* and he began work on it in March 1933 [4]. Some time in April the unmistakable head of Lenin appeared in the mural, leading to criticism in the press, such as the headline in the *World Telegraph*: “Rivera Perpetrates Scenes of Communist Activity for RCA Walls—and Rockefeller, Jr. Fooths the Bill.”

While the Rockefellers were aware of Rivera’s politics, and not unduly concerned about them, this new twist and the negative publicity it was receiving placed them in an untenable position, jeopardizing the relationship with their partners in the Rockefeller Center venture. Nelson Rockefeller, son of the family and Rivera’s principal contact and liaison, wrote to the artist:

Viewing the progress of your thrilling mural, I noticed that in the most recent portion of the painting you had included a portrait of Lenin.

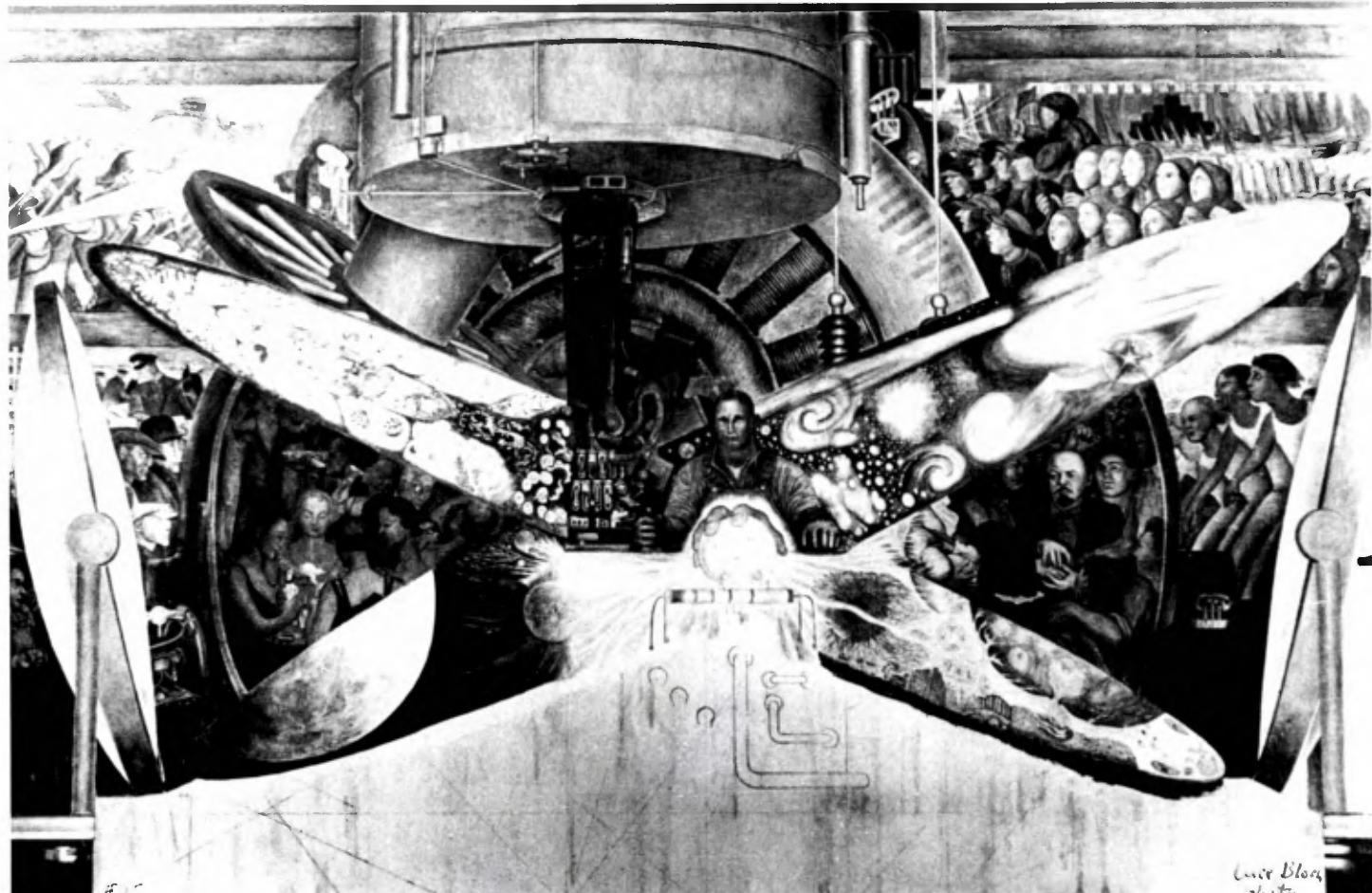
This piece is beautifully painted, but it seems to me that his portrait appearing in this mural might very easily offend a great many people... As much as I dislike to do so I am afraid we must ask you to substitute the face of some man where Lenin’s head now appears.

Rivera had literally painted himself into a corner—he was acutely aware of accusations from the Communist Party that he had sold out by working for the archcapitalist in the first place, and that he had become a figurehead for his assistants, who threatened to strike if he yielded to the request. After careful consideration, and with the aid of Shahn, then one of his assistants, Rivera replied that Lenin must stay, but as a compromise he would add some American heroes to the composition. He added, prophetically, “rather than mutilate the conception I should prefer the physical destruction of the composition in its entirety.”

A few days later, on May 9, Rivera was dismissed, paid in full, and escorted from the premises. The “Battle of Rockefeller Center” was on: the mural was covered up, and the national and international press covered the story and the political protests that accompanied the forced stoppage. On February 10 and 11, 1934, the mural was destroyed. The scandal and the publicity made Rivera the most famous muralist in the Americas and a hero to left-wing artists in the United States who, after the Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe, had tried to distance themselves from the perceived decadence of Europe and European abstraction. They aspired to a native American art that addressed the plight of the common man and those aspects that defined America and differentiated it from Europe.

As American artists during the thirties searched for a unique “American” art that was not based on French models, they looked to the Mexican muralists, whose creation of an epic national style that was not antimodern provided a powerful model. As American artist Mitchell Siporin (1910–76), put it: “Through the lessons of our Mexican teachers, we have been made aware of the scope and fullness of the ‘soul’ of our own environment. We have been made aware of the application of modernism toward a socially moving epic art of our time and place.”

Another American artist who was profoundly moved by the Mexicans and what they had achieved was George Biddle (1885–1973). In May 1933 he wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt suggesting that he initiate a government-sponsored mural program in the United States:



4 • Photograph of Diego Rivera's unfinished RCA Building mural, taken by Lucienne Bloch just before all work was stopped in May 1933

The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because Obregon allowed Mexican artists to work to plumber's wages in order to express on the walls of the government buildings the social ideals of the Mexican revolution.

The younger artists of America are conscious as they never have been of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through; and they would be eager to express these ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government's cooperation. They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling to achieve.

Aware of the "Battle of Rockefeller Center," Roosevelt commented that he did not want "a lot of young enthusiasts painting Lenin's head on the Justice Building," but he took the suggestion on board ▲ and the New Deal's cultural support programs were born.

After their time in the United States, "The Big Three" continued to work in Latin America, attracting numerous followers. They left behind a powerful example of a type of public, national avant-garde art that could be at once critical, satirical, inspirational, and celebratory. Its genuine popularity with critics, patrons, and collectors as well as with the people marked a convergence of tastes ● not seen again in the United States until the advent of Pop art.

The sheer size and bravado of the Mexicans' murals were also influential for American artists such as Ben Shahn, as was their creation of a popular figurative art with social content. While the Mexican muralists' influence on artists of the thirties was profound, their influence can also be detected in the work of later generations of

▲ artists producing political issue-driven art, and they can also be seen as prefiguring later movements negotiating issues of identity, such as the community mural movement of the late sixties and seventies in the United States and Latin America and the more recent urban community mural movement in postcolonial Africa. AD

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At the First All Union Congress of Writers, Andrei Zhdanov lays down the doctrine of Soviet Socialist Realism.

Soviet Socialist Realism emerged as a historically and geopolitically specific variant of the universally prevailing antimodernist tendencies of the late twenties and thirties: the *rappel à l'ordre* in France, Neue Sachlichkeit in Germany, Nazi painting in the Third Reich, Fascist neoclassicism in Mussolini's ▲ Italy, and the various forms of social realism in the United States. The terror regime of Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) not only provided the ideological and political framework, but also the pragmatic demands, for extraordinary propagandistic efforts by the ideological state apparatus. Accordingly, Stalin's hagiographers even credited him with having invented the term "Socialist Realism," claiming that during a secret meeting of writers in Maksim Gorky's (1868–1936) flat on October 26, 1932, Stalin supposedly stated the following:

If the artist is going to depict life correctly, he cannot fail to observe and point out what is leading towards Socialism. So this will be Socialist art. It will be Socialist Realism.

The first documented public usage of the term "Socialist Realism," however, had already appeared in an article in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Literary Gazette), for May 25, 1932, defining it—in the tautological language typical of ideology—as an art of "honesty, truthfulness, and as revolutionary in the representation of the proletarian revolution."

Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948), Stalin's chief cultural commissar and Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, gave a programmatic definition of Socialist Realism at the First All Union Congress of Writers in August 1934. Quoting Stalin's (in)famous exhortation that artists and writers should become "the engineers of human souls," Zhdanov (and Stalin) actually echoed the theory of the prerevolutionary aesthetician Aleksandr Bogdanov, who had spoken of literature as a practice that should "organize workers and the oppressed in the struggle for the final destruction of all kinds of exploitation."

Zhdanov's normative aesthetics was paradoxical, requesting that Socialist Realism should engage in "revolutionary romanticism," but also that it should also stand with "both feet on the ground of real life and its materialist foundation." It stated that artists should "depict reality in its revolutionary development" but that they should also educate the worker in the utopian spirit of

Communism. From January to March 1936—the year of the show trials and of the final elimination of the last remnants of modernism in the Soviet Union—Zhdanov published a series of articles in the Party's newspaper *Pravda* (The Truth) which denounced formalism in all of the arts. These publications, acquiring the status of prescriptions and prohibitions, introduced the period known as the *zhdanovschchina*, not only establishing the Party's total control of culture, but also the hegemony of Socialist Realism as the exclusive and official culture of authoritarian State Socialism.

Socialist Realism attempted to fuse the legacies of agitprop and ▲ the documentary projects of the twenties with heroicizing narratives that now—in the era of an intensely centralized Party control and its correlative ideology of authoritarian populism—had to be delivered in the manner of premodernist, nineteenth-century genre painting. This emphasis on narrative and figurative representation not only • conflicted profoundly with the already existing practices of the Soviet avant-garde, from the Constructivists to the artists of the *proletkult* and the LEF group (all of whose practices would soon be eliminated), but it proved to be incompatible even with the crucial legacies of nineteenth-century modernism. While the art of Jacques-Louis David and Eugène Delacroix, or of Honoré Daumier, François Millet, Gustave Courbet, and Adolph Menzel, would be celebrated either as art of revolutionary fervor or as art of the people, Impressionism ■ and Postimpressionism—notably the work of Paul Cézanne—now became the subject of endless debates, since they threatened Socialist Realism's fraudulent iconography and its false stylistic homogeneity. The notion of painting as a self-reflexive critical project had to be dismantled: Socialist Realism was to enforce the most banal forms of illusionistic depiction, foregrounding its purely mimetic functions and artisanal skills while claiming access to painting's putative transhistorical monumentality.

Reflection as a process

Georgy Plekhanov (1856–1918), one of the founders of Russian Marxism, was among the first to criticize the Impressionists, juxtaposing their work with that of a group of Russian nineteenth-century artists who were now presented as the really autochthonous predecessors of Socialist Realism, namely the *Peredvizhniki* ("Wanderers")

or "Itinerants"). This group had been founded in 1870 to break away from the St. Petersburg Academy, to diversify patronage by organizing traveling exhibitions throughout Russia (and by charging entrance fees), and to provide a realistic—sometimes politically critical—picture of Russia. On the occasion of the forty-seventh exhibition of the Wanderers in 1922, they published a declaration which reads like an early definition of the tasks of Socialist Realism:

We want to reflect with documentary truthfulness in genre, portrait, and landscape the life of contemporary Russia and the full range of its diverse ethnicities and their lives deeply devoted to labor.... While remaining faithful to Realistic painting, we want to seek those devices that are closest to the masses of people ... to help the masses, in formally finished works of painting, become aware of and remember the great historic process taking place.

Vladimir I. Lenin (1870–1924) and Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), but most importantly Joseph Stalin, disliked modernism intensely, in particular its recent Soviet avant-garde incarnations, and all three men favored the Peredvizhniki. Lenin's *Materialism and Empirico-Criticism* argued against the prevailing nineteenth-century theories of perception (by implication, against Impressionism and Postimpressionism) by stating that optical sensations were not—as the Russian followers of Austrian physiologist Ernst Mach (including Aleksandr Bogdanov [1873–1928] and, in his early writings, ▲ the aesthetic theorist Anatoly Lunacharsky) had suggested—real elements within the experience of the world, but rather that they were mere *reflections* of the real things.

Thus Lenin [1] referred back to German socialist Friedrich Engels's (1820–95) famous statement that "copies, photographs, images are mirror reflections of things." Yet Lenin defined *reflection* as no longer a mere mirror-image but rather as a *process* by which consciousness actively appropriates and transforms the world; this condition of *praxis* would now become the criterion of philosophical truth. Consequently, a *Theory of Reflection* emerges as one of the foundational theoretical programs of Socialist Realism, developed most notably in the early thirties during the Moscow sojourn of György Lukács, the Hungarian-German philosopher who was Marxism's foremost literary theoretician at the time.

Among painters, Impressionism remained a subject of continuous discussion. As late as 1939, Aleksandr Gerasimov (1881–1963) and his artistic colleagues in power (such as Boris Ioganson [1893–1973] and Igor Grabar [1871–1960]) could still call for the "all-sided illumination of Impressionism which was a very great contribution to the treasury of art." But less than ten years later, he would be among those condemning Impressionism in favor of a highly finished painterly style. As Matthew Cullerne Bown argues:

The Impressionist concentration on light, color and freedom of brushmark were all viewed negatively as tending towards the dissolution of solid, academically modelled forms in painting ... (Impressionism) was felt to be antagonistic to Socialist Realist painting which was intent on revealing the essences of



1 • Moisei Nappelbaum, *Photograph of V. I. Lenin*, 1918
Vintage silver-gelatin print

events from the point of view of the party, the working class and the "laws" of historical development.

From the mid-twenties onward, it became increasingly evident that the Constructivist avant-garde had failed to produce a culture for the new industrial and rural proletarian masses. There continued to be fervent debates about the renewed or remaining functions of painting in this historical moment, ranging from calls for the return to representational traditionalism and narratives in the manner of the Peredvizhniki (such as the emerging program of AKhRR) to the more complex models incorporating revolutionary poster design and the cinematic forms of montage and temporality, such as the paintings of the OST (the Society of Easel Painters.) Anatoly Lunacharsky, whom Lenin had reluctantly appointed in 1917 as the first head of Narkompros (People's Commissariat for Enlightenment), initially remained loyal to the avant-garde artists whom he had championed and endowed with institutional power. But now, presumably under Party pressure, he too argued for an urgent revival of narrative and figuration in painting, stating in a speech on May 9, 1923, entitled "Art and the Working Class" that "the main thing is to conquer the aversion to subject matter." Not surprisingly, in 1925 Lunacharsky claimed the Peredvizhniki as the equally true historical predecessors of a populist Socialist art of the present, and he reintroduced one of their key concepts, the *kartina*—the Russian for "picture"—into artistic debates. However, the term would now define not only the obligatory pictorial *narrative* (preferably a

dramatic scene that “realism” had to enact on the stage of painting) but also more specifically the cheap mass reproduction and distribution of that image in the tradition of the *lubki* woodcuts. In a speech of that year, Lunacharsky explicitly associated the concept of the *kartina* with the needs of the proletariat: “The proletariat needs the *kartina*. The *kartina* is understood as a social act.”

▲ Thus, AKhRR (the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia), the group that considered itself to be the legitimate heir of the Peredvizhniki, laid the foundations of Socialist Realism, claiming that its members isolated “ideological content as the sign of the truthfulness of a work of art.” AKhRR was officially founded at a meeting on March 1, 1922, and Yevgeny Katsman (1890–1976), one of the founders—ironically the brother-in-law of Kazimir Malevich—initially defined their project as “heroic realism.”

Two major figures of Soviet Socialist Realism

By the end of 1925, AKhRR’s membership numbered about one thousand artists, between them representing a broad range of the painterly positions that would soon define Socialist Realism: from the neoclassical academicism of Katsman and the sharp-focus photographic realism of Isaak Izrailevich Brodsky (1884–1939) to the more painterly approaches of the Moscow artists Ioganson, Gerasimov [2], and Il’ya Mashkov (1881–1944). To others, though, it was evident that the task of constructing representations for a newly industrialized society could not be achieved by the deployment of those conventional painting practices that suggested that reality and its objects were merely emerging from the unchanging, originary forces of nature. Rather, the new society required a new type of painting, if any, in which contradictory social relations and their transformation could be articulated. Thus, the critique of the AKhRR painters was already formulated by the late twenties, most vociferously by the exiled German theoretician Alfred Kurella, who had become director of the Fine Arts Division (IZO) at Narkompros:

If one hears the definition of art voiced by AKhRR, and if one sees their works (especially the paintings by Brodski, Jakolev, Kacman, et al.) one cannot help but ask the question: why don’t they just take photographs?... The artists of AKhRR have totally forgotten the difference between painting and photography.... In our century of artistic photography the purely documentary side of art is bound to perish.

Partially in opposition to the reactionary ideas of AKhRR, the OST was formed in 1924, counting among its members Aleksandr Deineka (1899–1969), Yury Pimenov (1903–77), Kilment Redko (1881–1948), David Shterenberg (1881–1948; its chairman), and Aleksandr Tyshler (1898–1980). Some of these painters were former students of the avant-garde institutes Inkukh and •Vkhutemas that had become the center of discussions between the Constructivists, the Productivists, and the Stankovists, that is, those painters who now closed ranks to maintain painting as a space of relative autonomy from either agitprop propaganda (such



2 • Aleksandr Gerasimov, *Lenin on the Tribune*, 1929
Oil on canvas, 288 x 177 (113 x 70)

as photomontage and poster projects) or the production of utilitarian objects as advocated by the Productivists.

The central figure of OST—and undoubtedly the most important artist of the historical chapter of Socialist Realism—Aleksandr Deineka attempted to fuse the legacies of the Soviet poster and film culture with the traditions of easel painting, emphasizing that temporality had to become an integral element of painting if it was to attempt to articulate the historico-political processes of change and dialectical transformation. Conceiving a model of painterly montage, Deineka wanted to translate the dynamics of revolution and industrialization into a painterly and compositional dynamics by using rapidly altering spatial perspectives, cinematic points of view and shifting modes of painterly execution.

Both AKhRR artists and OST artists (along with members of other groups) contributed to an exhibition organized in 1928, celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Red Army (which had by now become the most important patron of portraits of its own heroic warriors and scenes of its victories). Deineka’s painting *The Defense of Petrograd* was widely praised by the critics, partly because it opposed not only the model of nineteenth-century war paintings that served as the point of departure for most AKhRR painters, but also the photonaturalism of paintings such as Brodsky’s *The Session of the Revolutionary War Council* (1928) and *Lenin in the Smolny Palace* [4]. Deineka’s painting, by contrast, depicted the civil war not as a heroic episode of the past but as a process of collective transformation

3 • Aleksandr Deineka, *Building New Factories*, 1926

Oil on canvas, 209 × 200 (82 × 79)



1930–1939

continuing in the present. As the critic Chvojnik stated in his review of the exhibition, “The simplicity of the painting’s well-articulated rhythm gives a clear account of the endless stream and indefatigable will of the revolutionary proletariat.” Deineka’s compositional conception followed a pictorial principle that Ferdinand Hodler had developed earlier, in the first decade, with correlating positive figures and negative ground in a frieze of almost temporally structured alternating shapes passing across the surface of the painting. While Deineka’s peculiar and masterly synthesis of Soviet modernism and a more traditional definition of public and monumental mural painting could be called one of the most successful projects inside the perimeters of Socialist Realism, his work also bears clear resemblances to the dilemma of Neue Sachlichkeit in Germany, which had equally attempted to fuse the reality of new industrial technologies with the apparent obsolescence of pictorial means and subject matter. His painting *Building New Factories* [3] embodies all these contradictions. While Deineka equates the new industrial architecture with the modular picture grid, he repositions the latter within receding perspectival space. And in the construction of the figures, he gives us the most detailed modeling of the female bodies, yet their faces follow the rules of typecasting the anonymous Socialist subject.

The second major figure of Socialist Realism—and in many ways Deineka’s opposite—was Isaak Brodsky, who had joined AKhRR in 1923. His work and his biography exemplify the contradictions that governed the politics and the aesthetics of Socialist Realism. Brodsky

had met Lunacharsky in Petrograd in the company of Maksim Gorky in late 1917 or early 1918, and Lunacharsky had endorsed him in a letter to Lenin: “From an ethical and political point of view the artist Brodsky merits complete trust.” Before Stalin’s final consolidation of power, however, Brodsky was subjected to severe criticism within the Association by the younger generation of artists and was excluded from AKhRR at its conference in May 1928 for his “extreme photonaturalism”—his *Brodskyism*, as the edict of exclusion called his sharp-focus neoclassical realism.

But the calls of the early plan years for a new, revolutionary, nonacademically based proletarian art that had denied the continuing validity of the realist easel picture, were soon to be extinguished. Brodsky reemerged, to become Stalin’s favorite artist and a personal friend of Marshal Voroshilov, Stalin’s commissar for defence. In 1934 he was appointed as rector of the Leningrad Academy of Art, where he enforced a return to the strictest rules of traditional academic art education, subsequently becoming the first artist to be awarded the Order of Lenin. Apparently Brodsky met Stalin on at least one occasion in 1933, when—in the company of Gerasimov and Katsman—Stalin advocated that they should paint “pictures that were comprehensible to the masses, and portraits that did not require you to guess who was portrayed.”

One of Brodsky’s most successful paintings—among his industrious production of portraits of Soviet heroes in oil and lithographs—was *Lenin in the Smolny Palace* [4]. Although it was

manifestly the result of a photographic projection after a photograph by Moïsei Nappelbaum, Brodsky nevertheless tried to disavow his photomechanical sources. In fact, he claimed to have produced this astonishing likeness from a number of sketches of Lenin that he made at the Third Comintern Congress; Brodsky even staged photographs that showed him producing these preparatory sketches. Thus, Leah Dickerman convincingly argues that:

The simultaneous dependence on and masking of photography that lies at the heart of socialist realist practice offer a structure of ambivalence. On the one hand, socialist realism's use of (and even more its insistent fidelity to) a photographic source speaks of desire for the photographic. On the other, the erasure of the image's mechanical origins speaks of fear of the photographic.

Brodsky's portrait of Marshal Voroshilov [5], one of the most avid patrons of Socialist Realism, is a masterpiece of naturalizing ideology. It situates the chief of the most powerful military state apparatus, the Red Army, in a perfect fusion of peaceful leisure and the most detailed nature of a Russian landscape. That naturalist account, however, results from the concealed technical apparatus of photographic reproduction.

While the last major retrospective of "Artists of the Russian Federation over Fifteen Years" could still include a significant segment of works by the Soviet avant-garde when first exhibited at the Russian Museum in Leningrad in 1932, that proportion had already had to be excised in favor of Socialist Realism when the exhibition traveled to Moscow in June 1933. Ossip Beskin, editor of *Iskusstvo* (Art)—the Union's newly founded official



4 • Isaak Brodsky, *Lenin in the Smolny Palace*, 1930
Oil on canvas, 190 × 287 (74 ¼ × 113)



5 • Isaak Brodsky, *The People's Commissar for Defense, Marshal of the Soviet Union, K. E. Voroshilov, out skiing*, 1937
Oil on canvas, 210 × 365 (83 × 144)

journal (all other magazines having been abolished)—announced the final battle against the avant-garde with the publication of his book *Formalism in Painting* (1932).

This battle against modernism would culminate in the total liquidation of Soviet avant-garde culture during 1932 and 1933. A decree from the Central Committee of the Communist Party abolished all independent artistic groupings and established a nationwide Union of Soviet Artists, the *orgkomitet*. MOSSKh, the Moscow section of this envisaged union, was formed in 1932 and became the leading organization in the country, displacing or absorbing all the other groups (AKhRR, OST, OMKh, RAPHk, etc.).

Aleksandr Gerasimov had now emerged as the third key figure of Socialist Realism. He typically moved from one powerful position to the next, regardless of the fact that the political situation in general had become increasingly unmanageable for most intellectuals and artists after 1936. Thus, Gerasimov came to be elected chair of MOSSKh, and in a speech in 1939 he defined Socialist Realism as “an art realist in form and socialist in content,” an art that would celebrate the construction of Socialism and heroicize those who toiled on its behalf. Fashioning himself as a man of the Russian people, he enjoyed the company and support of the party elite, devoting much of his energy to official commissions of portraits of Lenin, Stalin, and Voroshilov, executed in a glazed style that imbued the faces of authoritarian state socialism with a double sheen: that of an affirmation of their authenticity through photographic presence and that of a transposition to their heroic status within a timeless past of neoclassicism.

While Socialist Realism would continue to be constantly embattled from 1934 to the beginning of the Kruschev thaw in 1953 and onward, it was basically defined by the following key concepts:

1. *Narodnost'* (*narod* meaning “people,” “nation”). Coined by the former member of the World of Art group, the Symbolist painter Aleksandr Benja (1870–1960), *narodnost'* insisted on the relationship of art to the *people*. Initially conceived as a multicultural model, which yet allowed for the specificity of each ethnic group within the newly formed Union, it became a monolithic and ethnocentric norm to produce a chauvinist Soviet (that is, a fictitious Russian) culture. *Narodnost'* required that painting should first appeal to popular sentiments and ideas, but the concept also addressed the artist's task to document the current work of the population, to communicate with the working masses and to recognize and dignify the structures of their daily lives. The concept of *narodnost'* also served to support a Soviet version of a return to tradition. The theorists of Socialist Realism—just like their French and Italian counterparts of the *rappel à l'ordre*—embraced the art of classical Greece, of the Italian Renaissance, and of the Dutch and Flemish Old Masters of genre painting. Nikolai Bukharin, for example, argued that artists should “combine the spirit of the Renaissance with the huge ideological baggage of our age of Socialist revolution.” Ivan Gronsky, the editor of *Novy Mir* (The New World), stated in 1933 that “Socialist Realism is Rubens, Rembrandt, and Repin put to serve the working class.”

2. *Klassovost'* insisted that Socialist Realism should clearly articulate the class consciousness of the artist as much as that of the depicted subjects, a consciousness that had been heightened during the Cultural Revolution.

3. *Partiynost'* required that representations and their artistic execution should publicly confirm that the Communist Party had the leading role in all aspects of Soviet life. The concept was first defined in Lenin's essay “Party Literature and Party Propaganda” (1905).

4. *Ideynost'* demanded the introduction of new forms as central to the work of art. These new forms and attitudes had to be approved by the Party. The concept also aimed to make evident that every Socialist Realist work of art would enact the project of Socialism and articulate the glorious future promised by Stalin and the Party.

5. *Tipichnost'* requested that portraits and figure painting should depict typical characters in typical circumstances as heroes and heroines, drawn from recognizable and familiar circumstances. As Cullerne Bown states, “*tipichnost'* was a double-edged sword in Socialist Realism: on the one hand it helped the creation of accessible and eloquent works of social art, on the other it was a pretext to criticize (as ‘untypical’) paintings which failed to present a rosy enough image of the Soviet reality.”

Gerasimov's staying power exceeded that of all his colleagues. Thus, when the USSR Academy of Arts was created on August 5, 1947, as the Party's institution of total control, Gerasimov rose to yet another position of supreme power to become the Academy's first president. In this role, Gerasimov would be traveling through the Soviet satellite states—East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia—to inspect the successful enforcement of the Socialist Realist programs in the art academies of those countries. His decrees now defined the tasks of Socialist Realism with an ever-increasing authoritarian animus and antimodernist aggression:

To fight formalism, naturalism, and other manifestations of contemporary bourgeois decadent art, lack of ideology and political commitment in creative work, falsely scientific and idealistic theories in the area of aesthetics. BB

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In “The Sculptor’s Aims,” Henry Moore articulates a British aesthetic of direct carving in sculpture that mediates between figuration and abstraction, between Surrealism and Constructivism.

What counted as a tradition was never as well established in sculpture as in painting, so when the academic modeling of ideal figures based on (neo)classical precedents had lost all validity by the turn of the century, it was not clear what could replace it as a basic way of working. In Britain matters were complicated by the fact that modernist responses to this sculptural decay on the Continent were not yet well known in ▲ this early period: some news of the fragmented figures of Auguste Rodin had crossed the Channel, but little report of the semiabstract • carving practiced by Constantin Brancusi, let alone of the radically different models of the object, the construction, and the ready-■ made, proposed by Picasso, Tatlin, and Duchamp.

Nonetheless, before World War I, the British group of artists ◆ known as the Vorticists had already rejected the humanist tradition of academic art as “flat and insipid” (as the critic T. E. Hulme put it), and they looked primarily to Jacob Epstein to show the way in this new sculptural wilderness. Born to Polish Orthodox Jews in the United States, Epstein had moved to London in 1905 after three years of study in Paris. Although trained in the traditional modeling of the figure, he immediately looked for alternative models in the carved forms of preclassical and primitive arts at the British Museum, the Louvre, and elsewhere—especially ancient Greek, Egyptian, Assyrian, and American. The influence of these sources was already apparent in his first major commission in London, in 1908—a set of huge nudes bluntly carved in stone to represent different stages of human life for the new building of the British Medical Association on the Strand. Despite the time-honored theme of the male nude, these archaic giants provoked great controversy, which is some indication of British conservatism in art at the time. Yet this furor was nothing compared with the one that greeted his next major work, *The Tomb of Oscar Wilde* in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris [1], which remains startling to this day. In high relief Epstein carved out of a great block of limestone an entity that can only be called alien—an implacable sphinx that is equal parts Mayan god and Assyrian winged bull (based on such a figure in the British Museum, it was likely inspired by Wilde’s poem “The Sphinx”). Frozen in horizontal flight, this strange angel guards the great Irish writer who had been exiled to an early death for his homosexuality (“for his mourners will be outcast men,” the



1 • Jacob Epstein, *The Tomb of Oscar Wilde*, 1912
Père Lachaise cemetery, Paris

inscription on the tomb reads in part, “and outcasts always mourn”). But the tomb, too, needed guarding, for the genitals of the sphinx were soon smashed—a gesture in which aesthetic and sexual reaction seem to have converged.

Where all energy is concentrated

Drawn into the Vorticist circle in the years prior to World War I, Epstein moved away from allusions to the primitive, which his close friend Hulme could not abide, toward a different evocation of the primordial—of modern man as atavistic, aggressively mechanistic, even murderous. His long-lost *Rock Drill* [2], a large



2 • Jacob Epstein, *Rock Drill*, 1913–15 (1973 reconstruction)

Polyester resin, metal, and wood. 205 × 141.5 (80½ × 55¾)



3 • Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Red Stone Dancer*, c. 1913

Red Mansfield stone. 43.2 × 22.9 × 22.9 (17 × 9 × 9)

conjunction of plaster creature and actual drill, is even more alien than his angel for Wilde, and without the redemption nominally promised by the latter. With a head that is half helmet and half snout, this machine-man with slatted ribs captures the Vorticist ethos of a “new ego” (as Vorticist leader Wyndham Lewis put it), hardened against the shocks of the modern world, more effectively than any other work. “Here is the armed, sinister figure of today and tomorrow,” Epstein remarked in retrospect, after he had turned away from this kind of work. “No humanity, only the terrible Frankenstein’s monster we have made ourselves into.” This monster is not sterile, however, as it carries its amorphous progeny within its exposed midsection, as if to literalize the male fantasy of reproduction without women. This fantasy is common enough among modernists, but here this creation seems to occur outside of humanity altogether. (The opposite number of this belligerent ▲ robot is the supplicant *The Invisible Object* of Alberto Giacometti.)

Epstein produced nothing again so radical in its antihumanism as *Rock Drill*, and it was, in fact, his compressed fragments of carved figures in stone that were more influential on other Vorticists like Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, as well as on subsequent sculptors like Henry Moore (1898–1986) and Barbara Hepworth (1903–75). In Paris during the winter of 1912–13 Epstein had met Brancusi and befriended the Italian Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920); perhaps this confirmation of direct carving furthered the practice in Britain. In any case, even as Epstein turned back to modeling after the war, Gaudier-Brzeska took up carving prior to it.

Although only twenty-four in 1914, this son of a French carpenter helped Lewis and Ezra Pound shape the Vorticist journal *Blast*. (Gaudier-Brzeska carved his *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* in the same year—the title captures this fierce evocation of Pound as high priest of modernist English poetry—and Pound published a book on Gaudier-Brzeska in 1916 that kept his work alive for Moore, Hepworth, and others.) “At the heart of the whirlpool … where all energy is concentrated” is how Lewis defined “the vortex” in *Blast*, and Gaudier-Brzeska took this concentration of energy in the compression of mass as his goal. To achieve such vitalistic density he often interlocked forms in a way that partook of both Cubist and African models. Thus Gaudier-Brzeska gave his *Red Stone Dancer* [3] • a savage *contrapposto* à la Matisse’s *The Blue Nude*; at the same time its schematic signs—inscribed triangles for a face, ellipses for a hand (or is it a breast?)—possess some of the semiotic ambiguity ■ of Picasso’s work of this time. Yet *Red Stone Dancer* also manifests a tension peculiar to Gaudier-Brzeska—a tension between an expressive kind of vitalism and an antinatural notion of abstraction that Hulme had elaborated from the 1908 thesis *Abstraction and Empathy* ▶ by the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer. Sometimes Gaudier-Brzeska was able to turn this tension to his advantage: for example, the interlocked forms of his carved plaster *Bird Swallowing a Fish* (1914) literalize a Vorticist conception of nature as eat-or-be-eaten. However dark, this vitalism appealed to Moore and Hepworth more than the mechanicity of other Vorticist work, for it retained nature as a primary reference for sculptural practice.

▲ Like some Futurists, some Vorticists were swallowed by the very war that they welcomed as “a great remedy”: Gaudier-Brzeska was killed on the front in 1915 aged twenty-three, Hulme in 1917 (with an unfinished book on Epstein left behind). “Vorticism was not so much the harbinger of a new order as a symptom of the terminal disease of the old,” Lewis later wrote. “The brave new world was a mirage—a snare and a delusion.” Sculptors like Moore and Hepworth who were formed in the twenties turned away from the antihumanist swagger of the Vorticists (only, as we will see, to move toward a humanist sentimentality of their own). They were also less defensive regarding modernist developments on the Continent: whereas the Vorticists had a rivalrous relationship with Cubism and Futurism, the next generation advanced through a negotiation of such different avant-gardes as Surrealism and Constructivism. At the same time, Moore and Hepworth did not abandon the prewar principles of Gaudier-Brzeska and Epstein: in opposition to the academic tradition, they, too, looked to preclassical and primitive sources for “a world view” of sculpture (as Moore remarked in 1930), and in the process renewed the commitment to direct carving as an almost ethical value. Finally, like Gaudier-Brzeska and Epstein, Moore and Hepworth were initially outsiders to the British art establishment—Moore as the son of a Yorkshire miner; Hepworth, who was also from northern England, as a woman as well.

An intense life of its own

In his early carvings of the twenties Moore all but replicated prehistoric models in wood and stone—a small rounded horse, a smooth schematic head, a mother-and-child ensemble reminis-

cent of a fertility figure, and so on. By 1930 semiabstract figures predominated, both maternal and recumbent ones. Hepworth worked with these sympathetic types as well—all in stark contrast to the mechanistic Frankensteins and fragments of Vorticism. In opposition to relief (which Epstein sometimes still practiced), these carvers insisted on “the full three-dimensional realization” of sculpture in the round. To this end they also began to bore through the figure, and to rotate it around this hollow core, in order to make the sculpture whole through this very hole, as it were, with a fluent reciprocity of inside and outside that invited an almost tactile viewing of the finished work.

The next step was to extend this abstracted body, even to break it up in unequal parts on an elongated base. These parts were made to cohere as a kind of landscape (which could also reverse into landscape as a sort of body), as in Moore’s *Four-Piece Composition: Reclining Figure* [4]. Or they came together as a kind of mother–child ensemble (that might also evoke a sort of landscape), as in Hepworth’s *Large and Small Form* [5]. Her *Pictorial Biography* illustrates this piece opposite a photograph of Hepworth with one of her infant triplets on her knees in a composition that the sculpture seems to reproduce abstractly. This arrangement intimates that her biomorphic forms intend a psychological condition or emotional relationship in a way that points in turn to the influence of Surrealism, and Hepworth did acknowledge the impact of Hans Arp on her ▲ work, especially “the way Arp had fused landscape with the body.”

Moore also touched on this influence in a 1934 publication by Unit One, a group of British artists that, according to its leader, the painter Paul Nash (1889–1946), had “two definite objects”: “the pursuit of form,” as in abstract art, and “the attempt to trace



4 • Henry Moore, *Four-Piece Composition: Reclining Figure*, 1934

Cumberland alabaster, length 51 (20 1/4)

▲ 1909

▲ 1916a



5 • Barbara Hepworth, *Large and Small Form*, 1934

Alabaster. 23 × 37 × 18 (9 × 14 × 7)

the ‘psyche,’ as in Surrealism. In this short text (now known as “The Sculptor’s Aims”), Moore articulates his aesthetic of direct carving in five points. First, there is *truth to material*: “the sculptor works direct” so that “the material can take its part in the shaping of an idea”; thus, for example, the very graining of the wood in the diminutive *Figure* (1931) seems to guide the sweep of its shoulders, neck, head, and hair (or cape). Second, *full three-dimensional realization*: here Moore champions sculpture in the round for its “dynamic tension between parts” and multiple “points of view,” as in *Four-Piece Composition*. Third, *observation of natural objects*: different “principles of form and rhythm” are to be drawn from such things as pebbles, bones, trees, and shells. Fourth, *vision and expression*: here, in keeping with the plan of Unit One, Moore urges sculptors to attend to both “abstract qualities of design” and “the psychological human element.” And, finally, *vitality*: the ultimate goal of sculpture is “an intense life of its own, independent of the object it may represent.”

Despite its confidence, this program points to a basic tension in Moore, as well as in Hepworth: both were ambivalent about total abstraction, at least until this time. They were almost too ready to find a trace of the figure in their materials, as if it were somehow immanent in the wood or the stone, latent in its grains or veins, its curves or cracks. Thus projected in the material, this liminal figure grounds the sculpture in turn, keeps it away from the very abstraction that it otherwise appears to embrace. Sometimes Moore and

Hepworth even inscribed partial profiles on the surface (as in *Four-Piece Composition*), as if to pull the sculpture back into a semifigurative reading.

Hepworth overcame this ambivalence more fully than did Moore, especially as she became involved with Ben Nicholson (they married in 1932), who had just moved from post-Cubist paintings ▲ to the geometric reliefs in white for which he is best known. “The experience,” Hepworth later remarked, “helped to release all my energies for an exploration of free sculptural form.” This move into abstraction deepened about the time that her triplets were born (in October 1934). At this point Hepworth became “absorbed in the relationships in space, in size and texture and weight, as well as in the tension between the forms.” In this tension she hoped “to discover some absolute essence in sculptural terms”—an “absolute essence” that nonetheless had to convey “the quality of human relationships.” This last condition is telling, for even as her sculpture became abstract, often geometrically so, it remained implicitly figurative in the very relationality of its forms. In this way, the figure was not canceled so much as elevated to the general; it was made to appear universal through abstraction, not despite it.

This is key to this British aesthetic, and central to its great acclaim (at least in the Anglo-American context). For in effect this sculpture served as a kind of compromise, as an aesthetic resolution to troublesome tensions. In the first instance these tensions were technical: Moore and Hepworth advocated direct carving in

opposition to the traditional practice of modeling and casting, yet all the natural references and maternal allusions made this carving seem like molding—on the analogy of erosion or gestation—and so pointed to an undoing of this old opposition in technique. In a related way, Moore and Hepworth eased the tension between the opacity of the sculptural material and the clarity of the sculptural idea, for the second seemed to arise naturally from the first in the kind of transformation that modern aesthetics had long privileged. Finally, they also appeared to overcome the more recent opposition between sculpture-as-fragment (associated with Rodin) and sculpture-as-totality (associated with Brancusi).

At the same time, Moore and Hepworth managed stylistic contradictions. With others in the Unit One milieu, they worked to reconcile Surrealist and Constructivist tendencies—“the psychological element” and “abstract principles” (Moore). This reconciliation was prepared by the watering-down of Surrealism on its crossing of the Channel, and by the reducing of Constructivism to abstract

design in the *Circle* group around Naum Gabo. But Moore and Hepworth also contributed to this blurring of the two movements.

- For example, for Russian Constructivists “truth to materials” meant a treatment of industrial materials in a way that might render the constructive process of art not only physically transparent but also socially relevant. For Moore and Hepworth, on the other hand, it was a means to allow the traditional materials of sculpture to guide its semifigurative working. The ideological service of this work was to humanize abstraction, and to keep it within the realm of art. It provided a similar service vis-à-vis Surrealism. Although the British art critic Adrian Stokes related this sculpture to the aggressive drives foregrounded in the psychoanalysis of Melanie Klein, the “psychological human element” in Moore and Hepworth was too nonspecific to be very disruptive, much less perverse. In effect they offered a Surrealism without the uncanny, in which natural analogies were favored over psychological provocations.

zation” of sculpture was also a “rehumanization” of art, undertaken in reaction against the “dehumanization” preached by the Vorticists and made all too real in World War I. But just as clearly this rehumanization was no cure for “the terminal disease of the old” (Lewis). As Harrison has also suggested, it was a liberal response to what was already a crisis in liberalism—a liberalism about to be overwhelmed by various fascisms and another world war.

In large part this sculpture appears so human, almost natural, even universal, through its confection of modern and primitive allusions. In a short text from 1930 (now known as “A View of Sculpture”), Moore intimated that this primordial effect is, paradoxically, a mediated one:

The world has been producing sculpture for at least some thirty thousand years. Through modern development of communication much of this we now know and the few sculptors of a hundred years or so of Greece no longer blot our eyes to the sculptural achievements of the rest of mankind. Paleolithic and Neolithic sculpture, Sumerian, Babylonian and Egyptian, Early Greek, Chinese, Etruscan, Indian, Mayan, Mexican and Peruvian, Romanesque, Byzantine and Gothic, Negro, South Sea Island and North American Indian sculpture; actual examples of photographs of all are available, giving us a world view of sculpture never previously possible.

This statement anticipates the notion advanced by André Malraux a few years later of a *musée imaginaire* of world art. This idea of a “museum without walls” was founded equally on the empire of the West (its appropriation of cultural artifacts from around the world) and the empire of photography (its ability to turn these disparate artifacts into similar examples of “style”). In their own way, Moore and Hepworth produced a kind of *sculpture imaginaire*, “a world view of sculpture” elaborated into a practice of modern sculpture. Why was this “world view of sculpture” so attractive at the time? To what needs did it respond? And how did it come to count as a primary kind of modern sculpture (alongside the abstract design of Gabo and company)? Greatly acclaimed in the forties and fifties, this sculpture was later punished for its very success, as advanced artists in the sixties scorned its recipe of Surrealism and Constructivism and turned to the models that it seemed to occlude: the readymades of Duchamp and the constructions of Rodchenko. And still today, after its great inflation and equally great deflation, it is difficult to see this sculpture clearly. HF

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A world view of sculpture

There was further conciliation offered in this work. As suggested above, rather than overthrow the figure, as in the construction and the readymade, Moore and Hepworth tended to generalize it through abstraction. In this way, the old regime of art persisted in the very appearance of the new, which again is part of the great appeal of this work—and part of its ideological service too. As the British art critic Charles Harrison has argued, Moore and Hepworth worked to generalize “sculpture” as “an innate category of experience—the response to ‘significant form,’ wherever it might be found,” in bones or stones, bodies or landscapes (“significant form” was the phrase of the early-twentieth-century British formalist critic Clive Bell). Perhaps, as Harrison suggests, this “all-inclusiveness of sculpture” was “a radical and progressive idea” in Britain at the time, but it was still achieved through a softening of aesthetic differences and political edges. Clearly this “universal-

1935

Walter Benjamin drafts "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," André Malraux initiates "The Museum without Walls," and Marcel Duchamp begins the *Boîte-en-Valise*: the impact of mechanical reproduction, surfacing into art through photography, is felt within aesthetic theory, art history, and art practice.

In 1931 Walter Benjamin wrote "A Short History of Photography," in which, as a critic and theorist increasingly shaped by Marxist thought, he analyzed the medium's relationship to social class. Sharing something of a historical berth with the nineteenth-century novel, photography began (in the 1840s and 1850s) by participating in the heyday of bourgeois culture, so Benjamin related. An amateur pastime, it commemorated the frank exchange of intimacy between friends, as its early practitioners—writers or painters—made each other's portraits, images whose long exposure time (around five minutes) imposed a kind of open gaze and physiognomic authenticity.

By the end of the century, the commercialization that had rapidly overtaken photography had overtaken the class that supported it as well. The clarity and strength with which the new lenses and emulsions had initially captured the captains of industry had yielded to an uncertainty that expressed itself in the hothouse settings for middle-class portraits with their aspirations toward "art"—the sitter posed amid the flowers of a winter garden, or greenhouse, dappled in light and shade. This was the bourgeoisie losing its proprietorship as a class, wrote Benjamin, and the only authentic way to photograph what had happened to it within the urban setting that housed it was to show its class extinction. This is what Eugène Atget did when, in image after image, he shot the streets of Paris emptied of people, as though one were at "the scene of a crime."

The face of time

Photography's reinvention of "portraiture" awaited the twenties, so Benjamin argued. Here bourgeois individualism gave way to the kind of depersonalization that belongs to a different structure of society: a more collective one, as in the masses of faces passionately rendered in the films of Russian director Sergei Eisenstein; or a more anonymous one, as in Aleksandr Rodchenko's *Woman at the Telephone* [1]; or a more sociologized one, as in the social "types" catalogued by the German photographer August Sander in the late twenties, in his *Antlitz der Zeit* (1929) for instance, and early thirties [2, 3].

Returning four years later to the problem of photography and film in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin exchanged the earlier analysis based on class for



1 • Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Woman at the Telephone*, 1928
Silver-gelatin print, 39.5 × 29.2 (15½ × 11½)

one now grounded in modes of production. The use-value of a work, he reasoned, cannot be separated from the conditions under which it is produced. Within primitive societies these conditions inevitably involve hand fabrication, whether by craft procedures or by a simple transfer of magical properties to an object through the touch of shaman or priest. This "cult-value," often operating out of sight of the community, depends on the authenticity of the sacred object, the healing or other properties of which will not inhere in mere replicas or reproductions. The culture of engraved copies of original works of art that begins to develop in the Renaissance adds "exhibition-value" to cult-value and clearly imposes a new use on



2 • August Sander, *Farming Couple*, c. 1932

Silver-gelatin print, 26 × 18.2 (10½ × 7⅓)

the art object, one involving its propaganda impact as its image circulates through papal or diplomatic channels. But this form of the copy makes a clear distinction between itself and the artistic original whose status as *original* is undiminished. Benjamin terms this status the work's "aura," by which he means its untransferable uniqueness. The handcraft that produces the etched copy participates in the mode of production of the original; both bear the touch of their maker.

With industrialization, conditions of production radically change, as a matrix or "die" is now fashioned from which to mass-produce objects. Mass production entered the world of the image initially via lithography, which, though hand-drawn, is mechanically printed. But photography soon took over as mechanical reproduction through and through. Hand work does not intervene in taking the picture nor in its printing and, in line with other industrial forms, its matrix—the negative—is not its "original" since it does not fully resemble the finished image. Rather the photograph is a multiple *without* an original. "From a photographic negative," as Benjamin wrote, "one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense."

Authenticity and the aura connected to the original are thus *structurally removed* from the mechanically produced object,

which, as Benjamin pointed out, "substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence." If such an existence could be characterized as tied to the place and time of its origin and thus psychologically distant from its viewer, the mechanical reproduction vaults over that distance. It satisfies "the urge to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness." Mechanical reproduction thus develops a corresponding psychological drive, with its own way of seeing: "To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction." Thus a serialization of production (base) begins to effect a serialization of vision, which drives in turn a taste for serialization in the work of art itself (superstructure). Going from the mode of production to the "use-value," Benjamin now writes: "To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility." The number of artists whose work has been "designed for reproducibility" either unconsciously or consciously (from Duchamp to ▲ Warhol and beyond) bears out Benjamin's prediction that the change in the mode of production would sweep all aesthetic values before it. "Earlier much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art," he wrote. "The primary



3 • August Sander, *Gentleman Farmer and Wife*, 1924

Silver-gelatin print, 26 × 18.3 (10⅔ × 7⅔)

▲ 1914, 1918, 1960c, 1962d, 1964b, 1966a

4 • André Malraux with the photographic plates
for the *Museum Without Walls*, c. 1950



1930–1939

question—whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art—was not raised.”

The off-the-wall museum

In 1935 Walter Benjamin was not the only one raising “the primary question” with regard to photography. The French novelist and left-wing political figure André Malraux (1901–76) also saw the medium as transforming “the entire nature of art,” but with conclusions diametrically opposed to those of his German counterpart. Where they agreed was on the fact that the photograph wrenched the original away from the site for which it was made and relocated it in an entirely new place, closer to its viewer and reorganized for a new set of uses. They also agreed that this extraction somehow denatures the original works, since in the process of being folded into the photograph that reproduces such works, “they have,” as Malraux argued, “lost their properties as *objects*.” But where the two men disagreed was in the interpretation of this loss, since for Malraux, “by the same token, they have gained something: the utmost significance as to *style* that they can possibly acquire.”

This stylization enabled by photography was a function of the kinds of close-ups and eccentric camera angles that began to be

linked in the twenties to what was called the photographic “new vision.” Photography’s capacity for massive disruptions of original scale (tiny cylinder seals enlarged to become the same visual size as monumental bas-reliefs, for instance), its ability to use strange camera angles or theatrical lighting to effect stunning reinventions (with ancient Sumerian terracotta figures thereby emerging as the cousins of twentieth-century sculptures by Joan Miró), and its possibilities for wresting a dramatically framed fragment from a larger work by means of cutting or cropping: all of this surgically intervenes in the aesthetic unity of the original to enable new and startling grafts. The conclusion Malraux draws from this is a salute to the medium that makes it possible: “Classical aesthetics proceeded from the part to the whole; ours, often proceeding from the whole to the fragment, finds a precious ally in photographic reproduction.”

Photography, then, is the great leveler, the means of submitting objects from every period and every place to a kind of stylistic homogeneity, so that they take on the features of “our aesthetics.” And the payoff of this procedure is a compendium of total information about the world’s art that is made possible by the new tool. This compendium, the art book, is what Malraux began to call “the museum without walls” [4]. The original French for this—the

“musée imaginaire” (the imaginary museum)—brings out the antimateriality of the operation, its drive to reduce the physicality of the object to the virtuality of the image, a drive that will only be reinforced later in the century when the imaginary museum *really* reaches for global coverage and its virtual home will not be the art book but the internet.

If for Malraux the value of the art book is that it democratizes the experience of art by bringing it into the lives of vastly more people than the elitist museums had done (a value that is exponentially increased by the web, in the eyes of enthusiasts of the “information superhighway”), this was not its primary function. Rather, it was that, by means of its concatenation of photographic reproductions, the book recodes works of art from “objects” into “meanings”—as he had said, the works gain “the utmost significance as to style that they can possibly acquire.” The art book is a semiotic machine, then; and the photograph is what gives it leverage. For the photograph is the great facilitator of *comparison*, of moving past the contemplation of a work in isolation to the *differential experience* of it, its meaning emerging—as linguist Ferdinand de Saussure had assured us it would—in relation to what it is *not*.

One of Malraux’s very first texts, a 1922 preface to an exhibition catalogue, already presents this notion of art as a vast semiotic system, a multiple chorus of meaning. In it Malraux had written: “We can feel only by comparison. He who knows *Andromaque* or *Phèdre* will gain a better idea of the French genius by reading *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* than by reading all the other tragedies by Racine. The Greek genius will be better understood by comparing a Greek statue to an Egyptian or Asiatic one than by acquaintance with a hundred Greek statues.”

Malraux, at the age of twenty, did not stumble by himself onto this conception of the aesthetic as comparative and therefore as fundamentally semiotic. Apprenticed to the art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Malraux was indoctrinated into an experience of the visual arts that was informed by both German art history and Cubist aesthetics, which is to say a way of seeing that had dispensed with the idea of form as beauty in favor of a conception of it as “linguistic.” Classical art, as an aesthetic absolute for Western taste, had instituted beauty as the ideal of artistic practice and experience. In the late nineteenth century the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin had relativized this absolute by arguing that Classicism can only be “read” within a comparative system through which it can be contrasted with the Baroque. Setting up a group of formal vectors through which to make such comparative readings—the tactile versus the optical, the planar versus the recessive, closed form versus open form—Wölfflin transmuted form into the condition of the linguistic sign: oppositional, relative, and negative. Form no longer had value in itself, but only within a system, and in contrast to another set of forms. The aesthetic component was no longer beautiful; it was significant.

Kahnweiler’s connection to this early, structuralizing art history in Germany influenced his own understanding of Cubism. ■ For Picasso’s dealer saw the Cubist exploitation of African art, for

example, as a breakthrough to the production of forms that would function as signs. Malraux took this dictum, and never forgot it. Art produces signs that can be read comparatively. Comparison decentralizes and dehierarchizes art, for the comparison works on the juxtaposition of systems—all systems: east versus west, high versus low, courtly versus popular, north versus south. And photography, by fragmenting and isolating the signifying elements from within a work’s complexity, is the ultimate aid to this reading.

If the massive study that finally emerged from Malraux’s contemplation of this problem was called *The Voices of Silence* (1951), this was because the “texts”—which he called “fictions”—that such readings can produce would release a new power from the mute work of art. It is this transformation into a system of meaning that makes up for what reproduction takes away, leaving no room for regret that these figures have lost “both their original significance as objects and their function (religious or other); we see them,” he declared, “only as works of art and they bring home to us only their makers’ talent.”

Benjamin had said “That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art”; Malraux was insisting on retaining a notion of aura no matter how transformed. The “fiction” created by the art book transmits what he calls “the spirit of art.” And it is this spirit that reproduction liberates to tell its story, no matter how silently: “Thus it is that, thanks to the rather specious unity imposed by photographic reproduction on a multiplicity of objects, ranging from the statue to the bas-relief, from bas-reliefs to seal-impressions, and from these to the plaques of the nomads, a ‘Babylonian style’ seems to emerge as a real entity, not a mere classification—as something resembling, rather, the life-story of a great creator.”

The “original” copy

Dates seem to have their own center of gravity: 1935 was not just the moment for both Benjamin and Malraux to contemplate art’s fate at the hands of reproduction, it was also the year when Duchamp began to create his own museum without walls, although whether it was to tell “the life-story of a great creator” (Duchamp himself) or not is, as always with Duchamp, held hostage to the artist’s extreme sense of irony. The *Boîte-en-valise* [5] was begun in 1935 as a massive retrospective of Duchamp’s work to date carried out through sixty-nine reproductions, including tiny replicas of several of the readymades. Miniaturizing the museum exhibition to the size of a carrying case, this “art book” unmistakably strikes up a family resemblance to a salesman’s sample case. It is thus that Malraux’s eloquent “voices of silence” are rescored for advertising jingles and the “spirit of art” is retooled in the light of the commodity.

Yet nothing is simple with Duchamp. Over the course of the next five years he painstakingly produced his reproductions by the labor-intensive method of collotype printing, in which color is applied by hand with the use of stencils, on average thirty such for each proof. Executing them himself, these became *coloriages originaux* (original



5 • Marcel Duchamp, *Boîte-en-valise*, 1935–41 (1941 version)

Assemblage, dimensions variable

colorings-in), which issued into the extreme aesthetic mutation of authorized “original” copies (some of them even signed and notarized) of original works, some of which (the *readymades*) were themselves unredeemably multiples. In this endless perspective of facing mirrors, original and reproduction thus continue to change places, with Duchamp now defying Benjamin’s dicta by returning to the authenticating touch of the artist, and now thumbing his nose at Malraux’s “great creator” by shackling this spirit to the compulsive performance of serialized repetition.

Summarizing the effect of the *Boîte*, David Joselit has written that it may appear to be about shoring up “Duchamp’s artistic identity through a coherent summary of his oeuvre, but as an elaborate performance of compulsive repetition—the same form of repetition that Freud associated with the unconscious instinctual drive of death and Eros—Duchamp represented a self that is alternately organic and inorganic, masculine and feminine. The act of copying both constitutes and destroys the self.... He had found himself—*readymade*.” RK

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1936

As part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and other photographers are commissioned to document rural America in the grip of the Great Depression.

Two unforgettable films by the American documentary film-maker Pare Lorentz (1905–92)—*The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937)—emerged from the many produced by the Information Division of the Farm Securities Administration (FSA), a US government agency established in 1936 as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Both films were documentaries of the crisis conditions of rural America in the grip of the Great Depression, the first depicting the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, the second, the catastrophic flooding of the Mississippi River system.

Beyond merely documenting the plight of the victims of these natural disasters, however, Lorentz was intent on achieving at least two other things: to articulate the human cause of these events in the persistent misuse of the land by its owners, and to propagandize for specific government programs to address this situation, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and its projects for building dams along the Mississippi River system. And for this latter goal to be effective, Lorentz needed to seize the imagination of the public, first, by acquainting the citizens of a huge country with parts of it they had never seen before or known much about; and, second, by giving his factual film the emotional drive of a fictional narrative. Only in this way could he overcome the characterization emanating from parts of the US Congress that Roosevelt's programs were a form of the “socialism” that many Americans dreaded, while at the same time countering this demonization by advocating a version of that very same socialism (that is, the centralization of authority necessary to the TVA, or the use of farm cooperatives in order to restructure the prospects of the tenant farmer).

To amber waves of grain ...

On the eve of moving into the FSA to head its Historical Section, Roy Emerson Stryker (1893–1975), had long meetings with the sociologist Robert Lynd to refine his own sense of mission with regard to documentary. He emerged from these sessions with the idea of coordinating the Section's efforts by preparing “shooting scripts” that he would issue to the team of photographers working under him. An early version of part of such a script goes:

HOME IN THE EVENING

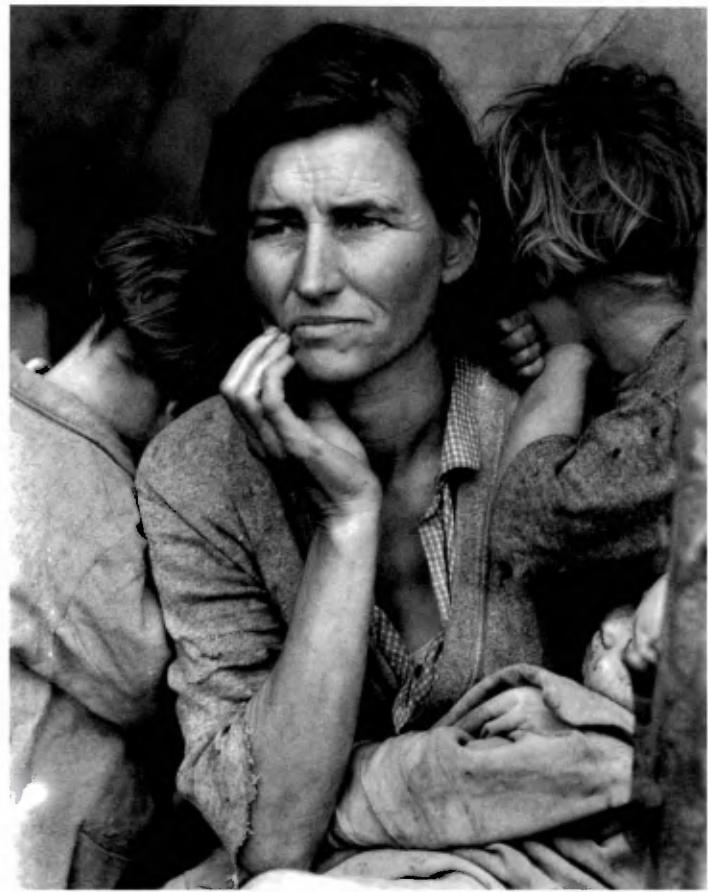
Photographs showing the various ways that different income groups spend their evenings, for example:

- Informal clothes*
- Listening to the radio*
- Bridge*
- More precise dress*
- Guests*

The static character of this “script” obviously sets it apart from the grand flow of cinematic narrative, which can control its own temporal momentum, moving in a few dramatic seconds, for instance, from droplets melting from branches in the Wisconsin springtime to the vast sweep of the Mississippi reaching the Delta, as Lorentz did in *The River*. And indeed, Stryker's idea of how to collate the results of the images that his photographers would amass over the nine years of their collective efforts (consisting of more than 100,000 prints) was not a sequential narrative but a spatial container: an encyclopedic file or archive, organized, by categories and subcategories and subdivisions of these.

The immediate use to which the FSA photographs were put was the supply of visual information to the public, whether through the government's own books and exhibitions or, more effectively, through the mass media, in such newly founded illustrated weeklies as *Life* (begun in 1936) or *Look* (begun in 1937). For Stryker, the FSA material was, however, substantially different from the photojournalism on which these magazines thrived, since he viewed news photography as “dramatic, all subject and action”; while on the other hand, he said, “Ours shows what's in [the] back of the action.” Against the news photo's subject and verb, Stryker characterized the FSA work as adjective and adverb.

This is probably as good a characterization as any of Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* [1], the photograph that perhaps more than any other came to stand for the emotional appeal, effectiveness, and memory-searing quality of the FSA's work. For there is no action connected with this image, unless its sitter's staring into an utterly uncertain future could be called action. And as for the adjective and adverb connection, in its shuttling back and forth between the universal—the reading it invites of a timeless “human



1 • Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936

dignity" emerging from within a situation of despair—and the particularity of the woman the camera captures, this image constitutes an example of the kind of "humanitarian realism" that Stryker supported. Indeed, Lange's picture, which came to be called "Madonna of the Migrants," sets up certain echoes with religious paintings, whether these be the seventeenth-century Italian painter Caravaggio's projection of the mother of Christ into the lowliest of Roman peasant women, or a work like Rosso Fiorentino's *Dead Christ* (1525–6) which, like Lange's image, wedges the figure of the Man of Sorrows between two flanking angels.

The redemptive tenor suggested for Lange's work by such comparisons is not out of keeping with an overall concern of the survey. As a contemporary of Stryker's wrote: "You could feel the Depression deepen but you could not look out of the window and see it. Men who lost their jobs dropped out of sight. They were quiet, and you had to know just when and where to find them." Stryker saw the mission of his survey, with its search for the details of rural life and small-town poverty, as a project "to find them." And he gloried in the photographs of an entire range of human types, the faces of whom, he felt, proclaimed the will and the ability to survive the utmost hardship. As Stryker would later say: "The faces to me were the most significant part of the file."

But if Stryker read a message of survival and redemption in the photographs, others have seen them as globally projecting an entirely different message. The historian Alan Trachtenberg has

Works Progress Administration

From the time between Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inauguration as President of the United States in January 1933 and the summer of 1935, the federal government ran a series of work-relief projects in an attempt to aid the vast numbers of unemployed created by the Great Depression. At the urging of Henry Hopkins, the director of the Civil Works Administration, a small allocation was made to artists through the Public Works of Art Project. Typical of the early phase of federal relief, this program was both short-lived (its funding ran out after four months) and the target of political controversy. In New York, those lucky enough to be signed onto it spent their time cleaning and repairing the city's statues and monuments; with its demise they were forced back onto the relief rolls.

By the summer of 1935 Hopkins had managed to persuade Roosevelt to set up the Works Progress Administration, a mammoth program of work-relief that would "take America off the dole and put it back to work." As Hopkins expressed it: "Those who are forced to accept charity, no matter how unwillingly, are first pitied, then disdained." During its six years, the WPA employed an average of 2,100,000 workers and spent \$2 billion. Its nearly quarter of a million projects ranged from raking leaves to building airfields. As he had in the Civil Works Administration, Hopkins made sure that money would be channeled to artists. Accordingly, over this same period five percent of WPA funds (\$46 million) and two percent of its employees (38,000) were allotted to the creative and performing arts. For the visual arts this meant the Federal Arts Project, directed by Holger Cahill, in addition to which there was a Federal Music Project, Theater Project, and Writers' Project.

In New York City, about 1,000 artists joined the FAP payroll in its first four months. The guidelines that required painters to be divided up between the mural and easel divisions also mandated a screening procedure according to which artists would be classified as "unskilled, intermediate, skilled, or professional," with their payscale regulated by these grades. Traditionalists and modernists competed fiercely for administrative power and control of this and other processes. Although the traditionalists were dominant for the most part, a small group of abstract artists led by Burgoyne Diller and Harry Holtzman—disciples of Piet Mondrian—were able to gain enough power to assign murals to young abstract painters such as Arshile Gorky, Stuart Davis, Byron Browne, Jan Matulka, and Ilya Bolotowsky.

The effect of the Federal Arts Project was an overwhelming one of bringing artists together in a new way: artists not only helped each other get around bureaucratic rules, but also the WPA offices to which they went to get their checks and their assignments became meeting places along with the bars and coffee houses of the Village. No longer obliged to work at part-time jobs, these full-time artists now saw themselves as a single community.

written, for example: "If there is a great overarching theme of the FSA file, it is surely the end of rural America and its displacement by a commercial, urban culture with its marketplace relationships. Automobiles, movies, telephone poles, billboards, canned food, ready-made clothing; these familiar icons from the file bespeak a vast upheaval ... a profound breach in the relation of American society to its "nature" and to the production of sustenance from the land."

In this reading, in which the file's images of trains sliding past grain silos can be seen as representations of the machine as the agent of the further impoverishment of the dispossessed, or the repeated pictures of billboards announce the replacement of handmade signs by printed ones, an important shift away from the human face is announced. And in such a shift, Stryker's disagreement with the most famous of his photographers can be felt. For Walker Evans (1903–75) had a predilection for just those building facades and posters that projected a land emptied of its "human" content that Stryker resisted [2].

The FSA style

Joining Stryker's project in 1935, when the FSA was still called the Resettlement Administration, Walker Evans worked for Stryker for eighteen months. Their differences were expressed as the split between Evans's demand for a "pure record" and Stryker's desire for pictures that would promote social or political change, a desire that led the decidedly nonsurvey photographer Ansel Adams (1902–84) to complain to Stryker: "What you've got are not

photographers. They're a bunch of sociologists with cameras." Indeed, Evans was careful to separate himself from real documentary, a term he did not want applied to his work, saying: "The term should be *documentary style*. You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless. Therefore art is never a document, although it can adopt that style."

Contained within Evans's seemingly paradoxical statement—that documentary could be just another "style," albeit the style in which photography "as such" is essentialized—is a whole aesthetic that developed around the medium in the thirties, slowly building into the postwar years and fully blossoming in the sixties to become the official stance of such arbiters of photographic taste and photographic history as the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Photography. Although the museum was an enthusiastic supporter of Evans's work, the documentary photographer who came to be seen as the most perfect representative of photography's essence was a Frenchman working in the opening decades of the century, Eugène Atget (1856–1927).

Like Evans's work, Atget's documentary pictures were commissioned in the context of various surveys: by the Library of the City of Paris, by French antiquarian societies, by builders' guilds, and so forth. But like Evans again, Atget's work made strong connections to aesthetic sensibilities that went beyond the sociological to lodge firmly in the tastes of contemporary art. Pictures like Evans's *Penny Picture Display, Savannah* [3], with its rows of contact sheets pressed against a shop window made synonymous with the surface of the print itself, the window's lettering—STUDIO—as compressive a



2 • Walker Evans, *Houses, Atlanta, Georgia*, 1936

Silver-gelatin print

▲ 1959d



3 • Walker Evans, *Penny Picture Display, Savannah, 1936*

Silver-gelatin print

force as anything in Cubist collage, were seen as self-reflexively modernist rather than documentary. And if such a self-referential stance could be found in Evans, this same position was just as easy to spot in Atget. His facades of Parisian cafés come across as brilliant modernist exercises, photographed as they are head on, in such a way that the reflection of Atget's own body standing next to his shrouded stand-camera is deposited on the doorway's window at just the point at which the café-owner's curious face pierces the same mirrorlike surface from within to perch, magically, atop the cameraman's body, collapsing the space both before and behind the image's surface onto a single, flat plane [4].

Indeed, Atget was adopted by every variety of modernist sensibility from the twenties on. His "found" montages of shopwindow reflection were Surrealist for the Surrealists; his flea-market "accumulations" were images of the serial life of the commodity for the German Neue Sachlichkeit; his limpid French gardens were sublime landscapes for the American styles that developed out of Precisionism as a form of "straight photography" that included Paul Strand, Edward Weston (1886–1958), and the Ansel Adams who had accused Stryker of sociologism. In fact, there were so many different "Atgets" to be found among the eight thousand negatives he left that it might be hard to focus all of these into the kind of oeuvre that we associate with a specific author—with its coherence reflecting the organic unity of a single person and the focused intentionality of an individual consciousness.

But if the Museum of Modern Art was determined to do so, it was because the very idea of a photographic "author" had, by the sixties and seventies, come to be projected through Evans's formula of "documentary style," now proclaimed as the essence of photographic art. To understand this we have to hold two (contradictory) notions in our head at once: the idea of the total transparency of the documentary photograph to its real world referent, or content, a content with which it does not interfere in any way; and the idea of style as the registration of the artist's own temperament, his or her vision, his or her shaping consciousness. Yet we also have to consider that there is a plane on which these two contradictions can be resolved. This is that of the camera itself, or rather the plate-glass surface on which, in a reflex camera, the image on the lens is mirrored for the photographer's view; it is there that the picture is previsualized on its way to leaving the real world from which it is "peeled" to enter the other, flattened reality of the "image." It is this difference between the world of matter and the world of the image that the photographer sees in the reflex camera's mirror, a difference that gives to that photographer an ironic distance, a "second degree" relation to reality that he or she can register in the results themselves. And it is this registration, be it ever so subtle, that enters the work as style.

Evans's style is built from just this second degree. The roadside billboard held absolutely parallel to the picture surface so that only



4 • Eugène Atget, *Café "Au Tambour," Quai de la Tournelle, 1908*

Silver-gelatin print (sepia-toned)



1930-1939

a tiny bit of landscape peeps out from behind its edges, pits the billboard's own illusionistic rendering of a house interior against the camera's now flattened data of the real world so that the collapse between the two produces a sense of reality and illusion ▲switching sides, with reality itself become simulacral. Or in his deadpan, twinned house facades, flattened by the stark lighting that seems to render them into drawings of themselves, the sense of their existence as "duplicates" or mere copies not only repeats this simulacral sensibility but ties it to the very duplicative and serial nature of photography as well. This frontality and flattening so consistent within Evans finally renders even the steel mills and workers' housing of a company town into merely a "picture" of themselves, unreal and uncanny [5].

But if these are features of Evans's style—personal, unmistakable, original—they are also dispersed throughout the full range of the FSA's photographic material. They are to be found, for instance, in the rhythmic, blank facades of Arthur Rothstein's photographs of sharecroppers' shanties, their hapless boarding etched into elegant patterns by light, or in the parallel rows of magazines in John Vachon's *Newsstand*, with their ranged repetitions of the same covers. Indeed, if Alan Trachtenberg called attention to such a displacement of the natural by the mechanical as the "overarching theme" of the FSA file, it was not to make Walker Evans the file's "author." But neither was it to make Stryker that "author," as some scholars are now doing. Instead it was an attempt to scatter authorship as such, making the survey's reach and the camera's machinic specificity intersect at a certain moment in historical time.

The death of the author

This depersonalization of the very idea of the author is, as we would imagine, at work in a certain branch of the critical assessment of Atget's work as well. If the Museum of Modern Art's desire to unify the vastness of his production around a single, authorial intention coincided, historically, with the sudden emergence in the mid-sixties of photography as a rarefied, collectible type of work of art, it also coincided with structuralism's proclamation of "the death of the author." The institution of the "author-function" or the "author-effect" in the place of an originary subject, the dispersion of such a subject into the labyrinth of a textual space whose myriad, already-written, already-heard voices any purported author merely quotes—all of this views authorship as nothing but an effect of the space of a multiplicity of archives or, ▲as Michel Foucault put it, of discourses. For the structuralist critic, then, Atget "himself" is simply an author-effect, the fractured source of which is the multiplicity of the many archives for which he worked. RK

FURTHER READING

James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*
(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941)

Lawrence W. Levine and Alan Trachtenberg, *Documenting America, 1935–1943*
(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988)

Maria Morris Hambourg et al., *Walker Evans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)

Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992)

John Szarkowski, *Atget* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000)

Roy E. Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In This Proud Land: America 1935–1943 As Seen in the FSA Photographs* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973)

1937_a

The European powers contest one another in national pavilions of art, trade, and propaganda at the International Exhibition in Paris, while the Nazis open the “Degenerate ‘Art’” exhibition, a vast condemnation of modernist art, in Munich.

DOn July 19, 1937, “Degenerate ‘Art’” opened in the Nazi homeground of Munich, a day after Hitler inaugurated the “Great German Art” exhibition in the massive new House of German Art across the street. The Nazis intended the two shows as complementary demonstrations of racial types and political motives in art. The first was intended to expose the degeneration of modernist art as intrinsically Jewish and Bolshevik; the second, to display the purity of German art as self-evidently Aryan and National Socialist (ironically, only six of the 112 artists in “Degenerate ‘Art’” were Jews). According to Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, degenerate art “insults German feeling, or destroys or confuses natural form, or simply reveals an absence of adequate manual and artistic skill.”

Nazi art was presented as its antithesis: archnationalist in subject, it exalted “German feeling,” and archtraditionalist in style, it armored “natural form” in neoclassical cladding, as in the pumped-up figures of its foremost sculptors Arno Breker (1900–91) and Josef Thorak (1889–1952). To a great extent, then, Nazi aesthetics projected a paranoid image of modernist art, and reacted against this image in its own art. To this end, it abjected the art of “primitives,” children, ▲ and the insane, the primary affiliations used to condemn modernist art in “Degenerate ‘Art,’” which also charged this art with “disrespect” for religion, femininity, and the military [1].

The two exhibitions were not complementary, however, in attendance: “Degenerate ‘Art’” attracted five times as many visitors



1 • Room 3 of the “Degenerate ‘Art’” exhibition, 1937, Munich
Showing the projection along the south wall, including the Dada wall

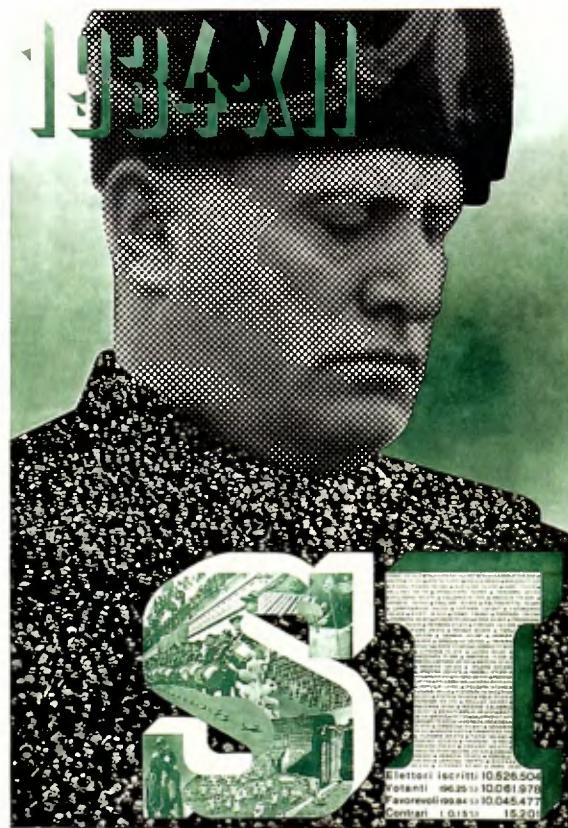
▲ 1903, 1922

as “Great German Art”—two million in Munich alone, nearly another million in its tour of thirteen other cities in Germany and Austria over the next three years. It remains the most visited show of modernist art ever. This is a highly ambiguous statistic: if the work was so repulsive, why did it attract so many? Is scorn born of resentment the most “popular” response to modernist art? Were there alternative, even subversive, kinds of spectatorship, one that secretly appreciated the art on view (there is some evidence of this)? The show was only one event among many other anti-modernist exhibitions, anti-Semitic films, book burnings, and so on. Moreover, “Degenerate ‘Art’” displayed just 650 of the 16,000 modernist works confiscated from thirty-two public art museums in 1937 alone, most of which were burned, “lost,” or sold for cash—a provenance with which collections around the world are still coming to terms. However infamous, then, the exhibition was only a single episode in a long war on modernist culture, a total purge of progressive institutions. In 1933 the Nazis shut down the ▲ Bauhaus; in 1935 Hitler ordered the eradication of modernist art altogether; in 1936 Goebbels banned non-Nazi art criticism; and so on. Such is the cultural penetration of a totalitarian state, and the political importance of antimodernism to the Nazi regime.

Body politics

For the Russian art historian Igor Golomstock, several principles governed the art policies of totalitarian regimes of the interwar period (he includes Stalinist Soviet Union and Fascist Italy equally): art was treated as an ideological weapon; the state assumed a monopoly over cultural institutions; the most conservative art movement was made official; and all other styles were condemned. There are exceptions to these rules, particularly the last two, especially under Mussolini. Modernism was anathema in many ways, but not always because it was antitraditional or antibourgeois. At first Mussolini embraced Futurism for its ideology of destruction, and all these regimes sought to replace old affiliations of culture and class with new identifications with leader, party, and state. However, no regime could tolerate modernist deformations of the body. Thus the Nazis condemned Expressionism, even though it was “German,” more violently than abstraction, which they deemed “Bolshevik”—much to the chagrin of the Expressionist Emil Nolde, a Nazi Party member who was well represented in “Degenerate ‘Art.’” In general, modernist art was dangerous because it privileged the individual in terms of original vision, singular style, personal redemption, and so on. Even more than its deformations, this “subjectivism” ran counter to the corporate imperative of totalitarian regimes—the need to bind the masses psychically and almost physically to the leader, party, and state [2]. In this scheme the individual body could only figure the body politic, and it was often imaged as phobically intact, even phallically aggressive, as in *Readiness* by Breker [3], an allegorical figure of Nazi militarism.

On the one hand, each totalitarian culture had to represent its political regime with its specific symbols—the Teutonic swastika



2 • Xanti Schawinsky, 1934—*Year XII of the Fascist Era*, 1934
Letterpress poster, 95.7 × 71.8 (37½ × 28½)

recovered by Hitler for his Nazi flag, or the ancient *fasces* of Roman lawmakers (an ax projecting from a bundle of rods bound with a red strap) recovered by the Italian Fascists for their party logo. On the other hand, it had to represent this regime as *nonspecific, suprahistorical, even transcendental*: thus the general use of a monumental neoclassicism. (Another highly ambiguous phenomenon is that other governments, not considered totalitarian, have also resorted to this idiom for similar reasons.) In this reversion to neoclassicism, Golomstock notes, the old hierarchy of academic genres was revived and recast. The royal portrait became the portrait of the party leader, and retained its “tendency to deify.” The history painting became the “historico-revolutionary theme,” and retained its tendency to mythify, with leaders, party martyrs (if Nazi or Fascist) or worker-heroes (if Stalinist) depicted as “creators of history.” Genre painting became renderings of labor either as a “fierce struggle or a joyful festival.” And landscape painting was treated “either as an image of the Fatherland … or as an arena of social transformations—the so-called ‘industrial landscape.’” The “historico-revolutionary” paintings were especially burdened, for they had another contradiction to face as well: the story of the nation had to be told, but its greatest epoch only began with the totalitarian regime. In this restrictive scenario, the best heroes, that is to say the safest ones, were either allegorical or dead or both. This mode of allegory and cult of death pervaded totalitarian architecture too.

However, the term “totalitarian” obscures as much as it illuminates. Politically, it elides the fundamental fact that Nazism and



3 • Arno Breker, *Readiness*, Berlin, 1939

Bronze, height 320 (126)

Fascism (which are hardly identical) struggled bitterly against Communism. On the artistic front alone, the neoclassicisms of the three regimes were as different as the nationalist myths that they served. The Nazis contrived a massive neoclassicism in order to posit an Aryan Germany as the warrior-heir to ancient Greece, while the Fascists produced a sleek neoclassicism in order to present a Fascist Italy as the modern revival of ancient Rome. The kitschy academicism of the Soviet Union was different still: not bound up with antique origin myths, its "Socialist Realism" was focused on present ideology—in the words of culture commissar Andrei ▲ Zhdanov, "to educate workers in the spirit of Communism."

The intensity of antimodernism also varied from regime to regime. Mussolini allowed some modernist forms (from Futurist art to Rationalist architecture) to coexist, indeed to combine, with some reactionary forms. In this way, as the American critic Jeffrey Schnapp has suggested, Fascism used "aesthetic overproduction" to cover for its ideological instability. And although Stalin suppressed Constructivism, he also employed some of its leaders, such as ▲ Aleksandr Rodchenko and El Lissitzky. (The recent argument, advanced by the Russian critic Boris Groys, that Stalin was the epitome of the Constructivist engineer of culture is reductive, indeed antimodernist in its own right.) The antimodernism of the Nazis was most thorough, but they too compounded atavistic forms of ritual (for instance, the party rallies at the Nuremberg Zeppenfeld designed by Albert Speer [1905–81]) with advanced forms of media (for instance, *Triumph of the Will*, the 1935 film by Leni Riefenstahl [1902–2003] of the 1934 party rally, the Nazi "Birth of a Nation"). In different ways, then, all three regimes mixed the modernist and the reactionary. Even when they were attracted to modernism for its transgression of bourgeois culture, they were repelled by its alienation of the masses; and even though they were eager to exploit the manipulative effects of media spectacle, they were reluctant to sacrifice the communal bases of archaic culture.

Some of these conflicts and contradictions surfaced at the International Exhibition in Paris, which opened in May 1937 under the government of Léon Blum, a Popular Front alliance of Socialists and Communists against fascism. With several art shows (both traditional and modern) and many national pavilions, the vast site extended from the Hôtel des Invalides across the Seine to the Trocadéro, with the Eiffel Tower (emblem of past exhibitions) at its center. Some pavilions featured displays of art and trade, others foregrounded photomontage narratives of nation; still others combined the two kinds of exhibit. Although intended as an international fair pledged to peace (replete with a Peace Tower at its north end), the International Exhibition was dominated by a cultural war that soon became an actual military one. Indeed, the Spanish Civil War, which further pressured the confrontations here, was already under way.

The central confrontation occurred on the right bank of the Seine just above the Pont d'Iena [4]. There the Soviet pavilion, designed by Boris Iofan (1891–1976), a primary architect of Stalinist monoliths, faced the German pavilion, designed by Albert Speer, the chief architect to Hitlerian hubris. (In the continuum between culture and war at issue here, this master-builder of the Nazis became minister of armaments during World War II.) In his memoir *Inside the Third Reich* (1970), Speer revealed that a secret sketch of the Soviet pavilion influenced his own design: "A sculpted pair of figures thirty-three [meters] tall, on a high platform, were striding triumphantly towards the German Pavilion. I therefore designed a cubic mass, also elevated on stout pillars, which seemed to be checking this onslaught, while from the cornice of my tower an eagle with a swastika in its claws looked down on the Russian sculptures. I received a gold medal for the building; so did my Soviet colleague."



4 • Details of the Nazi (top left), Soviet (top right), and Italian (bottom) pavilions at the International Exhibition in Paris, 1937

As Speer suggests, the two pavilions were seen as equal instances of effective propaganda, but the similarity ends there. The Soviet structure served as a kinetic pedestal that thrust the steel-clad *Industrial Worker and Collective Farm Girl* sculpted by Vera Mukhina (1889–1953) forward, as if into world-historical prominence; they are sculptural embodiments of the proletariat as new heroes of history. No one could mistake this ensemble for the *Monument to the Third International* (1920) proposed by the ▲ Russian Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin: these allegorical figures represented the Soviet Union of Stalin, specifically his brutal Five-Year Plans to industrialize production and to collectivize agriculture. But, like the *Monument*, the Soviet pavilion did ascend dynamically, here to the union of hammer and sickle, Communist emblems of factory and farm. And as Speer also suggests, this advance was indeed arrested by the German pavilion, an oppressive temple to imperial power that announced a very different notion of nation and history; to note only the obvious, it culminated in emblems of party, not figures of labor.

Although its steel construction may seem modern, this pavilion was clad with German limestone, not to mention the swastika tiles in gold and red recessed between its piers. And although its

stripped facade may also seem modern, this only “purified” the classical reference of the columns and the entablature. In fact, the pavilion was a typological pastiche in the guise of a pure monument, for even as its tower alluded to a classical temple, its exhibition hall alluded to a medieval church, in whose “apse” stood a model of the mausolean House of German Art designed by Paul Troost (1878–1934), the recently deceased predecessor to Speer as chief Nazi architect—an appropriate “altarpiece” in this architecture of death. For what is at stake in these historical allusions is the hubristic ambition to subsume history, indeed to transcend it. And this ambition was programmatic. Speer and Hitler, a failed artist and amateur architect in his own right, devised a “ruin theory” of architecture, whereby Nazi structures (such as the gargantuan Great Hall conceived by Speer for the new Berlin ordained by Hitler) would be built to last *beyond* the millennium of the Thousand-Year Reich—to subject all posterity to a sublime awe before its glorious ruins. Already “dead” in its neoclassicism, this aesthetic thus sought to dominate time posthumously—to turn time into a spectacle of domination. Perhaps this is what Walter Benjamin had in mind at the close of his famous essay on the new “mankind” fashioned by such spectacles: “its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”

A modernist retort

Within this war of pavilions there was also a battle of figures. Expunged from most modernist art for the first two decades of the century, the human figure returned with a vengeance in the • *rappel à l'ordre* (return to order) of the twenties and thirties—not only in reactionary art but also in antidemocratic politics, in which, again, identification with the body of leader, party, and state became imperative. Such figures as the Soviet Worker and Farm Girl were hardly realist: they were allegorical types not only of comradeship but of equality in Communist labor. No less allegorical, the *Monumental Groups* by Thorak that flanked the German pavilion stressed the opposite: these trios of one nude man and two nude women insisted on sexual difference. This insistence accorded with the strict divisions in Nazi society as a whole, but one senses a psychic import here too, as if the phallic body-ego of the Nazi masculine ideal required a “feminine” other against whom to aggress—an other represented in different ways by Jews, Bolsheviks, homosexuals, gypsies, and so on.

The Italian figures across the Seine were different again. These robed representations of various corporations were intended to connect the Fascist state to ancient Rome (the same association was advanced within the Italian pavilion). But rather than enliven the past, they petrified the present, and turned this mythical history of Italy into a kitschy kind of costume ball. Different still were the two photographs of two women (the change in medium is significant) that stood out from the photomontage displays ■ at the Spanish pavilion, which was under the control of the



5 • Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937

Oil on canvas, 349 × 777 (137 1/8 × 305 1/8)

Republican Popular Front government. The woman on the left, wrapped in the traditional costume of Salamanca, stands mute and grim, as if burdened by her status as a folklorish fetish, while the woman on the right strides toward us in a militia uniform, larger than life, with her mouth open in song or shout. The metaphor here is one of metamorphosis: the militant butterfly of Republican resistance bursts from the cocoon of Nationalist tradition, as her caption states: “Freeing herself from her wrapping of superstition and misery, from the immemorial slave is born THE WOMAN, capable of taking an active part in the development of the future.” Unlike the Fascist figures, she sheds the past in the name of a liberated future; yet, unlike the Soviet figures, she does so with a photographic specificity that makes her fight real.

And it was real. In February 1936, the Popular Front won elections in Spain; in July, General Francisco Franco led an army revolt; and three years of civil war ensued between his Nationalists (mostly army, Church, and industrialists) and the Republicans (mostly Socialists, Communists, anarchists, and liberals, supported by Basques and Catalans). Hitler and Mussolini aided the Nationalists actively, while Stalin supported the Republicans weakly. This, then, was the battleground behind the militant woman in the pavilion—a pavilion that connected democratic resistance and modernist art at several levels. The building, a Corbusian structure designed by Josep Lluis Sert (1902–83), was modernist, as were its principal contents, two protest-paintings made on behalf of the Republican cause: *The Catalan Peasant in Revolt* by Miró and *Guernica* by Picasso, the centerpiece of the exhibit [5].

On April 26, 1937, the German Condor Legion had bombed the Basque town of Guernica. Picasso, who had become the symbolic director of the Prado Museum in Madrid a year before, painted ▲ *Guernica* in six weeks, with motifs and forms drawn from his

hybrid Cubist-Surrealist work of the period. The huge painting shows four women in terror: one falls from a house in flames; two others flee distorted by fear; the fourth cradles her dead child and screams. A dismembered soldier lies on the ground, while a horse cries out in agony and a bull stares us in the eye. These animals attest to the bestiality of the bombing, but in this world turned upside down they also possess a humanity that seems stripped from the humans here. Picasso holds all this debris together by a pyramidal massing of figures and a muted range of blacks, whites, and grays. But his genius is to transform his own modernist inventions of Cubist fragmentation and Surrealist distortion into an expression of outrage: this is modernist art in the service of political actuality. A response to the Nazi bombing, a riposte to the Nationalist accusation that the Republicans had defiled “the artistic treasures” of Spain, *Guernica* also defies the mythical histories of totalitarian regimes, and rebuts the reactionary beliefs that political art can only be social realist and that modernist art can never be public. Here modernism is reconciled with referentiality, responsibility, and resistance. “Did you do that?” a Nazi officer asked Picasso in front of *Guernica*. “No,” Picasso is said to have replied, “you did.” HF

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- Dawn Ades and Tim Benton (eds), *Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators 1939–1945* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995)
Stephanie Barron (ed.), “Degenerate Art”: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991)
Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art* (London: Icon, 1990)
Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)
Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004)
Jeffrey Schnapp, *Staging Fascism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1996)

Naum Gabo, Ben Nicholson, and Leslie Martin publish *Circle* in London, solidifying the institutionalization of geometric abstraction.

Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art, edited by the Russian sculptor Naum Gabo (1890–1977) and the British painter Ben Nicholson (1894–1982) and architect Leslie Martin (1908–2000) and published to coincide with the exhibition “Constructive Art” at the London Gallery in July 1937, is an extraordinary document. It can be read in two opposed ways: as the last gasp of the utopianism that characterized the historical avant-gardes of the twenties or as the first step into what could be called their cooptation and institutionalized devolution. The content and composition of this volume—intended as a journal but produced, in the end, as a hefty one-time almanac—are worth examining in detail.

The design is resolutely inconspicuous, with its traditional grouping of plates off-text and its conventional typography. This clear demarcation between text and image echoes the strict adherence, in the organization of the volume, to the beaux-arts division of artistic practices by medium: the first three sections are devoted to painting, sculpture, and architecture respectively, and illustrated with an emphasis on historical continuity within each discipline, blending the works of the first generation of pioneers of “constructive art” with those of current (mostly British) artists and architects.

Only the fourth and last section, entitled “Art and Life,” conveys the sense of open interdisciplinarity that had been the lingua franca of the small avant-garde publications that *Circle* was emulating or to which it was responding, though the paucity of illustrations in this section seems to indicate that the editors deemed it was less important than the first three. It consists of texts on unconnected topics: on ▲ art education (by ex-Bauhaus director Walter Gropius); on choreography (by Ballets Russes star Leonide Massine); on “Light painting” (by László Moholy-Nagy, who had been living London since 1935 ■ but was to be appointed director of the New Bauhaus in Chicago within weeks after the publication of *Circle*); on typography (by ▲ Jan Tschichold, then still an ardent partisan of El Lissitzky’s Constructivist book design but very soon to become one of the most powerful proponents, as typography director of Penguin Books, of a return to neoclassicism in this field); on “biotechnics” (by the Czech architect Karel Honzík, who proposed under such a title a fairly innocuous comparison between the geometric forms encountered in nature and the structural principles of architectural functionalism—a pale imitation of Karl Blossfeldt’s successful *Urformen der Kunst*, whose first

English edition dates from 1929); and, finally, on “the death of the monument” (by the American historian Lewis Mumford). If no attempt was made to stress a common denominator between the various contributions to this pot-pourri section, it is perhaps because *Circle*’s editors felt that the task had already been performed by the brief unsigned editorial and by Gabo’s lengthy essay, “The Constructive Idea in Art,” at the beginning of the volume.

Given the dangers looming on the political horizon—made clear by the competitive stand-off between the Soviet and German pavilions at the 1937 Universal Exhibition, which had just opened in Paris when *Circle* appeared—the book’s unsigned editorial seems, with hindsight, amazingly naive in its utter optimism. “A new cultural unity is slowly emerging out of the fundamental changes which are taking place in our present-day civilization,” begins the short text. *Circle* is not a manifesto, we are told: its goal is to help the information circulate among practitioners of “the constructive trend in the art of today” who are working simultaneously in several countries, and to bypass all “dependence upon private enterprise” in order to directly reach the public. The editorial concludes with this sentence: “We hope to make clear a common basis and to demonstrate, not only the relationship of one work to the other but of this form of art to the whole social order.” Gabo’s essay, which immediately follows, sings the same tune. Acknowledging that *Circle*’s efforts come after a century of revolutions that “have spared nothing in the edifice of culture which had been built up by the past ages,” Gabo nevertheless affirms: “However long and however deep this process may go in its material destruction, it cannot deprive us any more of our optimism about the final outcome, since we see that in the realm of ideas we are now entering on the period of reconstruction.”

“Social order,” “period of reconstruction”: the language is that of the “return to order” that had blossomed in the aftermath of World War I, particularly in its modernist version as advocated by ▲ Le Corbusier in *L’Esprit Nouveau*. As if to underline this heritage, *Circle* contains the architect’s intervention in a famous public symposium, at the Maison de la Culture in Paris, under the aegis of the Communist Party (“The Quarrel with Realism”), where he is as rhapsodic as ever in his praise of the Machine, a stance echoed in Leslie Martin’s “The State of Transition” in the volume’s architectural section. And, just as Le Corbusier’s Purism was a reaction against the

analytic “excesses” of Cubism, Gabo sees the task of the “constructive” artist as that of building anew upon the *tabula rasa* created by the Cubist “revolutionary explosion.” For him, the critical function of avant-garde art (Dada is specifically targeted) is a thing of the past:

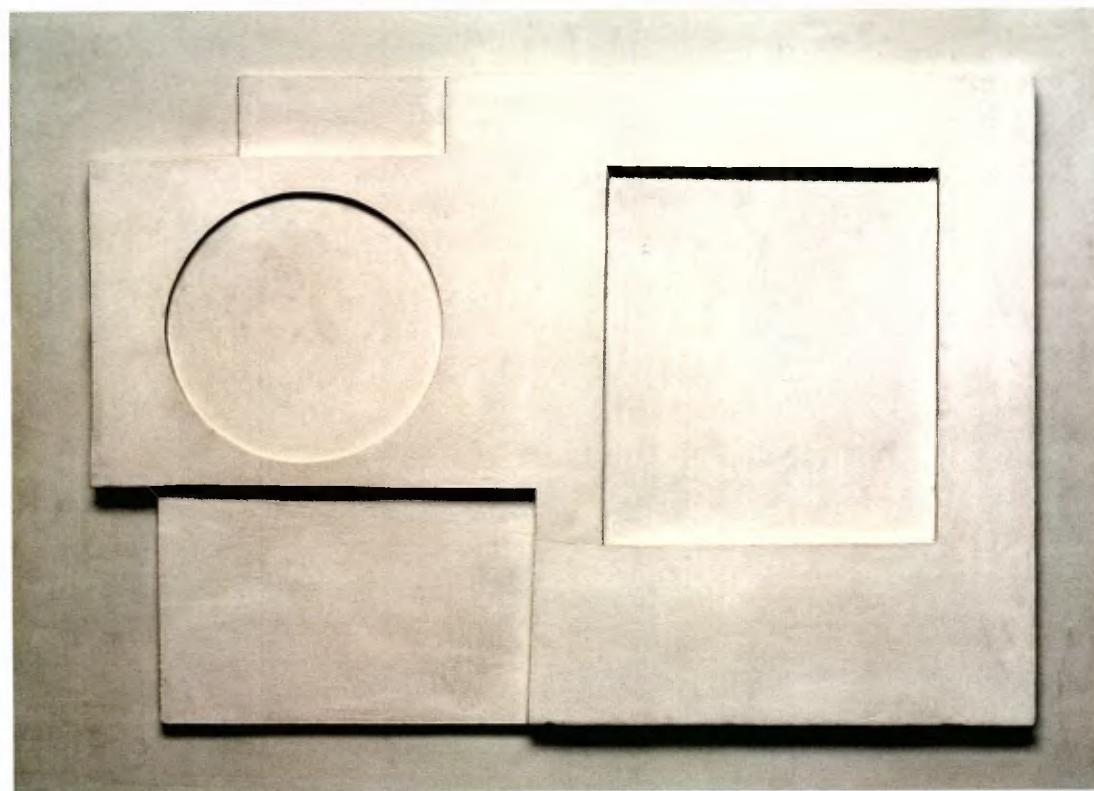
The logic of life does not tolerate permanent revolutions.... The Constructive idea does not expect from Art the performance of critical functions even when they are directed against the negative side of life. What is the use of showing us what is bad without revealing what is good?

Finally, like Le Corbusier before him in *Après le cubisme* of 1918, Gabo draws upon a parallelism between art and science in order to buttress his position. “We can find efficient support for our optimism in those two domains of our culture where the revolution has been the most thorough, namely, in Science and in Art.” Critical of a cliché of the literature on Cubism according to which this new art represented an “illustration” of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, Gabo warns against any pseudomorphic analogies between the productions of art and those of science (curiously, the sole scientist who contributed to *Circle*, J. D. Bernal, precisely fell into that trap in his essay “Art and the Scientist”). Art and science are not to be directly linked, but they partake of a common “vision of the world,” of a common search for “universal laws.” The main difference between Gabo’s stand and that of Le Corbusier on this matter concerns the style which they respectively consider as best suited to the task of expressing these “universal laws.” Both Le Corbusier and Gabo argue for a new humanism that would be coded in geometric forms, but while the former demands

anthropomorphism in art, Gabo conceives of geometric abstraction as the “cornerstone” of his program: “[The Constructive idea] has revealed an universal law that the elements of a visual art such as lines, colours, shapes, possess their own forces of expression independent of any association with the external aspects of the world [and] that their life and their action are self-conditioned psychological phenomena rooted in human nature.”

The vagueness of this program is nowhere more apparent than in the choice of contemporary paintings and sculptures reproduced in *Circle*. Besides the anthology of works by early pioneers, mentioned above (Arp, Brancusi, Braque, Mondrian, Duchamp, El Lissitzky, Gabo, Gris, Léger, Kandinsky, Klee, Malevich, Medunetsky, Moholy-Nagy, Pevsner, Picasso, Taeuber-Arp, and Tatlin), *Circle* offers an eclectic panorama of the current production of a second generation of abstract artists, all working within the parameters set by their predecessors. As in the case of *Cercle et Carré* and of *Abstraction-Création*, which appeared in Paris in 1930 and 1932 and which, like *Circle*, were used as platforms to organize exhibitions, most of the recent art reproduced by Gabo and his acolytes represents a middle-brow, academicized version of geometric abstraction that has no programmatic characteristic other than that of being “non-objective,” to use the vocabulary of the period.

The paintings are quite diverse—the post-Malevichean compositions of the German Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart (1899–1962) have little to do with the ovoids of the Swiss Hans Erni (1909–2015); the jazzy, interlocking volumes of the British John Piper (1903–92) bear no resemblance to the calm opposition, in Ben Nicholson’s white reliefs, of square and circle [1], nor to the floating shapes of the



1 • Ben Nicholson, 1934 (relief), 1934
Oil on carved board, 71.8 × 96.5 (28½ × 38)

French Jean Hélion (1904–87) [2]. However, they are all figurative (in the sense that the duality of figure and ground is nowhere called into question, and that in each of them several figures are set upon a neutral background). Furthermore, they all seem based on the assumption that achieving a state of equilibrium between competing figures is what is requested from art, if art is indeed to express the kind of “universal law” called forth by Gabo. The recipe sometimes makes for elegant compositions, but it can also yield facile, decorative work. Heralded by *Circle* as evidence of a transnational “new cultural unity,” this post-Cubist style, in which the main formal decision consists of a balancing act, was indeed fast becoming an international style, the rapidity of its spread being largely due to the fact that, with it, abstraction had lost its edge.

The section devoted to contemporary sculpture, though less eclectic in choice of works, had similar problems. Except for Alexander Calder’s mobiles, the majority of the works presented are carved (in wood or marble) and presented on pedestals, ▲ Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore having no qualms about that very traditional concept of the “monument” lambasted by Lewis Mumford in his contribution to the volume. The most telling position with regard to this issue is perhaps that of Gabo, whose essay, “Sculpture: Carving and Construction in Space” represents an about-face. While he reproduces some of his early works such as • the *Kinetic Sculpture* of 1920, it is to denigrate them as experiments (“more an explanation of the idea of a kinetic sculpture than a kinetic sculpture itself”); while he nearly appropriates the theory of his ex-rival Tatlin, according to which each form has to be ■ determined according to the properties of its material, he ends up advocating the notion of “absolute” form (absolute, thus not contingent upon its material); he repeats the plea of his 1920 “Realist Manifesto” for the constitution of space as a sculptural material, yet he defends the opposite possibility of the translation of his virtual volumes of the preceding years, done in Plexiglas, into massive stone carvings. His text ends with an apology for sculpture as the most efficient symbol of power—he praises this art for having given the “masses of Egypt confidence and certainty in the truth and the omnipotence of their King of Kings, the Sun”—♦ that could have been written by Aristide Maillol or Arno Breker. Predictably, most of Gabo’s subsequent work was miniature models of monuments. As Benjamin Buchloh noted, when Gabo finally realized one of these models on a large scale (the sculpture placed in front of the Bijenkorf in Rotterdam, completed in 1957), the “discrepancy between the structural and material elements,” most conspicuous in “its bronze-wire network faking tension and structural function,” would spectacularly betray Tatlin’s legacy.

“Constructive” art versus Constructivism

In fact, Gabo is not a Constructivist (even if he labels his art “constructive”), though he successfully persuaded generations of art historians that he was a legitimate spokesman for the movement (including Alfred Barr, who legitimated the claim). He

conceives of sculpture as the embodiment of a rational idea that could appeal directly to the mind of the spectator and be read as an image of consciousness: through material transparency (Plexiglas) of formal simplicity (symmetry, parabola), one would have access to the central core of the sculpture out of which volumes and surfaces project. This fundamentally figurative conception of sculpture is a far cry from the Constructivism of Rodchenko ▲ and the Obmokhu group, whom he opposed, as much as it is from • that of Katarzyna Kobro, whose antimonumental stance constitutes the best rebuttal of Gabo’s position (as well as a critique of most modernist sculpture).

There are two other serious differences between the Constructivist program and that of *Circle*. The first is that there is almost no trace of the political realm in the English publication. Reading Gabo’s admonition that the Constructive idea should not compel “art to an immediate construction of material values in life,” one could even say that it is resolutely apolitical. The immense question of new modes of production and distribution of art, so fervently discussed by the Soviet avant-garde, is completely ignored in the pages of *Circle*, where the only allusion to the life of works once they leave the artist’s studio is a meek reference to the evils of “dependence upon private enterprise,” mentioned above—a clear indication that the journal’s editors, probably with ■ the Art Deco phenomenon in mind, feared that their art would become mere decoration for bourgeois homes.

The second major difference between a “constructive” and a Constructivist art concerns the issue of composition. For the Constructivists, the traditional order of composition was what had to be destroyed—because both the subjective arbitrariness of the aesthetic choices it elicited, and the age-old conventions of its formal devices (balance, hierarchy), were for them ciphers of the authoritarian social order of the Czarist regime and had no place



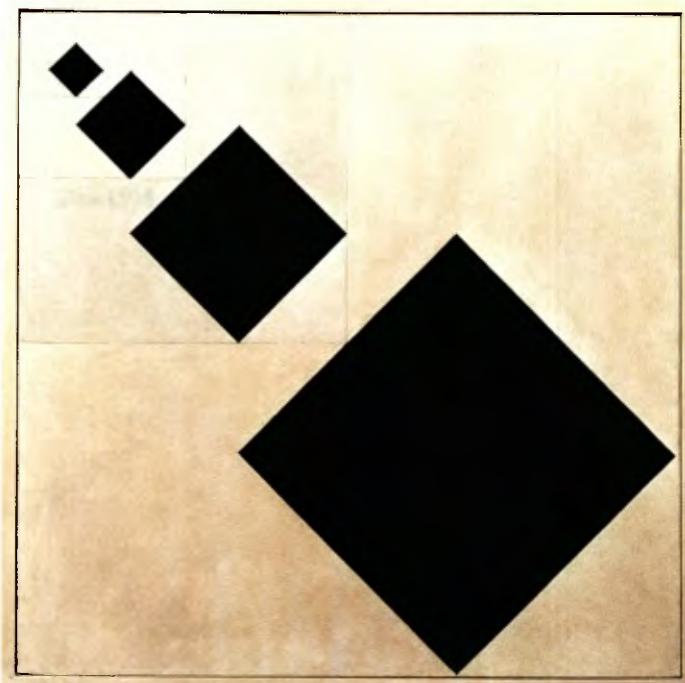
2 • Jean Hélion, *Équilibre*, 1933
Oil on canvas, 81 x 100 (31 1/8 x 39 1/8)

in a revolutionary society. They went to great lengths to find ways in which one could motivate the organization of a work of art according to the properties of its material and the process in use: it is this motivated, “objective” organization (as opposed to the subjective, arbitrary composition) that they called a construction. Had ▲ Gabo participated in the 1921 debate at the Inkukh (Moscow) at which such issues were discussed, he would undoubtedly have found himself a member of the losing minority.

In his defense, however, one should recall that by 1937 the strict opposition cast between composition and construction by Rodchenko and his peers was entirely forgotten. Furthermore, outside of Russia the very possibility of a noncompositional art had very few proponents (and the most articulate of them, • Wladyslaw Strzeminski, was little known in the West, although reproductions of his works regularly appeared in *Abstraction-Création*). Yet, one emerging trend should have appealed to the *Circle* editors, especially to Gabo, given his recurrent fantasy about ■ a convergence of interests between art and science: Max Bill’s Concrete Art, which had just been launched in Zurich (either *Circle* did not know about it, which is rather improbable, since Bill was very well connected, or they deliberately censored it.)

The term “Concrete Art” is not Bill’s own but Theo van ♦ Doesburg’s. Better known for his steering of the De Stijl movement, the Dutch artist, then based in Paris, had in 1930 published a small journal called *Art Concret* (it had only one issue), around which he intended to found a new artists’ group. In its pages, he advocated an art that would be programmed entirely by mathematic calculations before it was realized (“We reject artistic handwriting,” he wrote, adding: “Painting which is done in the manner of Jack the Ripper can interest only detectives, criminologists, psychologists and psychiatrists.”) The publication had no effect whatsoever and the group never coalesced, in great part because van Doesburg died only a few months later in a Swiss sanatorium. Bill, however, had been enormously impressed, as much as by van Doesburg’s manifestos as by his *Arithmetic Drawing*, a variation on the black, gray, and white *Arithmetic Composition* [3], in which the “Russian doll” logic of a figure within a figure transforms a simple *opposition*—between a black square placed on its tip within a white square that is four times as large—into a deductive structure that exactly determines the placement of each element. Bill’s art would never achieve the stark simplicity of van Doesburg’s late canvas—one could say that he never could dispense with “good taste,” ruining his very idea of a programmed, *a priori* art by his purely subjective introjection of aesthetic factors that could not be quantified, such as color.

Yet theoretically at least, Bill’s conception could have provided a way out for abstract artists who did not feel compelled by the post-Cubist, compositional model provided by *Circle*. Or they could have turned to Mondrian, and many thought they actually did, but at the cost of a gross misunderstanding due, in part, to his benevolent contribution to *Circle* and other publications of the sort. Had anyone then attentively read “Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art,”



3 • Theo van Doesburg, *Arithmetic Composition*, 1930

Oil on canvas, 101 × 101 (39½ × 39½)

▲ the long essay by Mondrian that accompanies the reproduction of his recent paintings in *Circle*, one would have been struck by this statement: “Neo-Plastic is as destructive as it is constructive,” and one might have realized that his ultimate goal was to destroy all figures, a goal diametrically opposed to that of the artists supported by *Circle*. But no one paid attention, and figurative abstract art became a cottage industry of the cultural elite—notably in the United States, where for a decade it filled the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (later called the Guggenheim Museum) and Albert Eugene Gallatin’s Museum of Living Art, as well as the exhibitions of the American Abstract Artists Association, giving abstraction a bad name until Abstract Expressionism—whose participants loathed the AAA—would cast it aside. YAB

FURTHER READING

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- Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Cold War Constructivism,” in Serge Guilbaut (ed.), *Reconstructing Modernism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990)
- Jeremy Lewinson (ed.), *Circle: Constructive Art in Britain 1934–40* (Cambridge: Kettle’s Yard Gallery, 1982)

Pablo Picasso unveils *Guernica* in the Spanish Republican pavilion of the International Exhibition in Paris.

Very few works of art of the twentieth century—if any—have acquired the status of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, painted in five weeks between May 10 and June 15 in 1937, before being installed as the artist's contribution to the Spanish ▲ Republican pavilion at the International Exhibition in Paris, the full title of which was the “Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne.” The reasons for the painting's universal and continuing attraction are not immediately evident, especially since several of the most important critical responses, from Anthony Blunt in 1937, to Max Raphael and Clement Greenberg in the forties and fifties to Carlo Ginzburg in the nineties, have identified the painting's failure to communicate. Or as Luis Buñuel, Picasso's compatriot and surrealist director confessed in his autobiography: “I can't stand *Guernica*. Everything about it makes me uncomfortable—the grandiloquent technique as well as the way it politicizes art.”

The painting's mythical status thus seems to have originated in a spectrum of unresolved ambiguities. First there is the question of style and historical form: Shall we associate the work with late • Cubism or high Surrealism, or could it possibly partake in both? Then there is the painting's ambivalent execution: Does its grisaille mimic press photographs and newsprint, or does it induce mnemonic mourning? And finally there is the undecidable genre: Is it a stage set or theater curtain (like Picasso's curtain for *Parade* in 1917), a decorative architectural mural, an agitprop montage billboard, or even—as the Catalan critic Lluís Permanyer called it in 1937—a cinematographic screen? T. W. Adorno responded to *Guernica*'s multiple irresolutions by figuring them as theoretical premises: “Modernism's refusal to communicate is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of ideology-free art. Such art also requires vitality of expression—a kind of expression that is tensed so as to articulate the tacit posture of art works.... As with Picasso's *Guernica*, it eventually takes on the unambiguously sharp contours of social protest.”

In the first week of January 1937 Picasso received a delegation of Spanish Republican government officials, led by the photomontage artist Josep Renau accompanied by Josep Lluis Sert, the Catalan disciple of Le Corbusier and architect of the Spanish pavilion at the Paris exhibition. The delegation commissioned

Picasso to contribute a mural painting for the pavilion. Francis Frascina has suggested that Picasso's conversations with his friends Paul Éluard and Dora Maar, engaging him since 1936 in debates concerning the Spanish Civil War, the Popular Front, and the role of images and poetry within Leftist and Surrealist agitation, had already prepared the ground for *Guernica*. One immediate result of the encounter with the delegation was Picasso's decision to publically support the Republican cause by etching the two plates of *Dreams and Lies of Franco* (*Songes et Mensonges de Franco*) on January 8–9 (with the second plate reworked and completed in June) to benefit the Spanish Refugee Relief campaign [1]. Picasso's first overtly political statement delivered a grotesque derision of Franco and fused two types of popular imagery: the *alleluias*, the archaic religious prints of Spanish Catholicism, and the *comics*, the contemporary narrative and iconic strips of challenged American literacy which had fascinated him since childhood.

The pavilion

The construction of the Spanish pavilion began on February 27, and it would finally open its doors on July 12, 1937, after a seven-week delay. Sert had designed the pavilion for the new Spanish Republic in manifest opposition to the totalitarian neoclassical buildings for the German Nazi state by Albert Speer and the Soviet ▲ Union by Boris Iofan. Conceived as a transparent modernist structure of readymade technological elements (such as moveable Celotex and concrete wall units), the pavilions featured a patio and stairs that were simultaneously reminiscent of a classical Mediterranean villa. A tall pole sculpture by Alberto Sanchez, a former baker and trade-union activist, was placed at the pavilion's entrance. Morphing between bone and branch, it was topped by a red flower reading simultaneously as a red star, and carried the euphoric inscription “El Pueblo Espagnol Tiene un Camino que Conduca a una Estrella” (The Spanish people has taken a path leading to a star).

Both the inside and outside walls of the pavilion featured Renau's large photomontages celebrating the Spanish Republic and its achievements [2]: the *misiones pedagogicas*, the new literacy and educational programs, and the recently constructed factories,



1930-1939



1 • Pablo Picasso, *Dreams and Lies of Franco*, (top) Plate I, January 8, 1937, Paris and (bottom) Plate II, January 8-9 and June 7, 1937, Paris
Etching, aquatint, and engraving on copper (state V), Plate I: 17 x 42.2 (61 1/16 x 16 5/8); Plate II: 18 x 42.2 (7 x 16 5/8)



2 • Josep Renau, photomurals on the exterior of the Spanish Republican pavilion at the International Exhibition in Paris, 1937

schools, and hospitals. The photomurals also documented the Republic's defense against the fascist military assaults organized by the Falange, the landowners, and the Church that had ignited the Civil War in 1936. Furthermore, works by Joan Miró (*The Catalan Peasant in Revolt*, a mural painted on Celotex tiles) and Julio González's bronze sculpture *La Montserrat* were on display. Picasso's mural was to be placed on the back wall of the large patio where documentary movies and newsreels were projected, across from Alexander Calder's *Mercury Fountain* (an astonishing structure that resurrected an ancient model of Mozarabic architectural splendor [3]). Undoubtedly, Picasso had familiarized himself with site and architectural model before starting work. And as late as April 18 and 19—as more than a dozen sketches confirm—he was still trying to develop his initial idea to paint a seemingly timeless variation of the artist in the studio (which would have linked his mural to Velázquez's *Las Meninas*).

A week later, on April 26, 1937, as plotted by Franco and his fascist generals, the small Basque town of Guernica was bombed by Italian and German warplanes (the infamous Condor Legion), constituting the first aerial saturation bombing of a European civilian population in the twentieth century (extensive aerial bomb attacks had been inflicted before by the European colonial

powers on populations in Africa and India). With the exception of the conservative newspapers (who either ignored the bombing or blamed it on the Republicans), international newspapers reported extensively on the barbaric acts of the fascist alliance and the destruction of Guernica. Picasso used images from *Ce Soir* (edited at the time by his friend, the Surrealist writer Louis Aragon) for his first six sketches for the painting on May 1. In these studies, Picasso abandoned his initial project of the studio allegory, mobilizing instead an iconography that combined Mediterranean and Spanish and mythical and religious images that had preoccupied the artist since the twenties: the Crucifixion and the Corrida, the Minotaur, the bull and the horse, motifs that the artist had fully developed in his extraordinary aquatint *Minotauromacy* in 1935 [4]. The first sketch of May 1 also featured a woman holding a light (equally cited from the print), and in the third sketch another screaming female figure and a fallen soldier were added. By the end of May 1, in sketch no. 6, Picasso had basically laid out the painting's structure, and on May 8, he produced another eleven sketches, approaching the painting's final composition in sketch no. 15. Three days later he transferred the preparatory studies onto a monumental canvas measuring more than 11 feet high by 25 feet wide (3.51 m × 7.82 m), installed in the



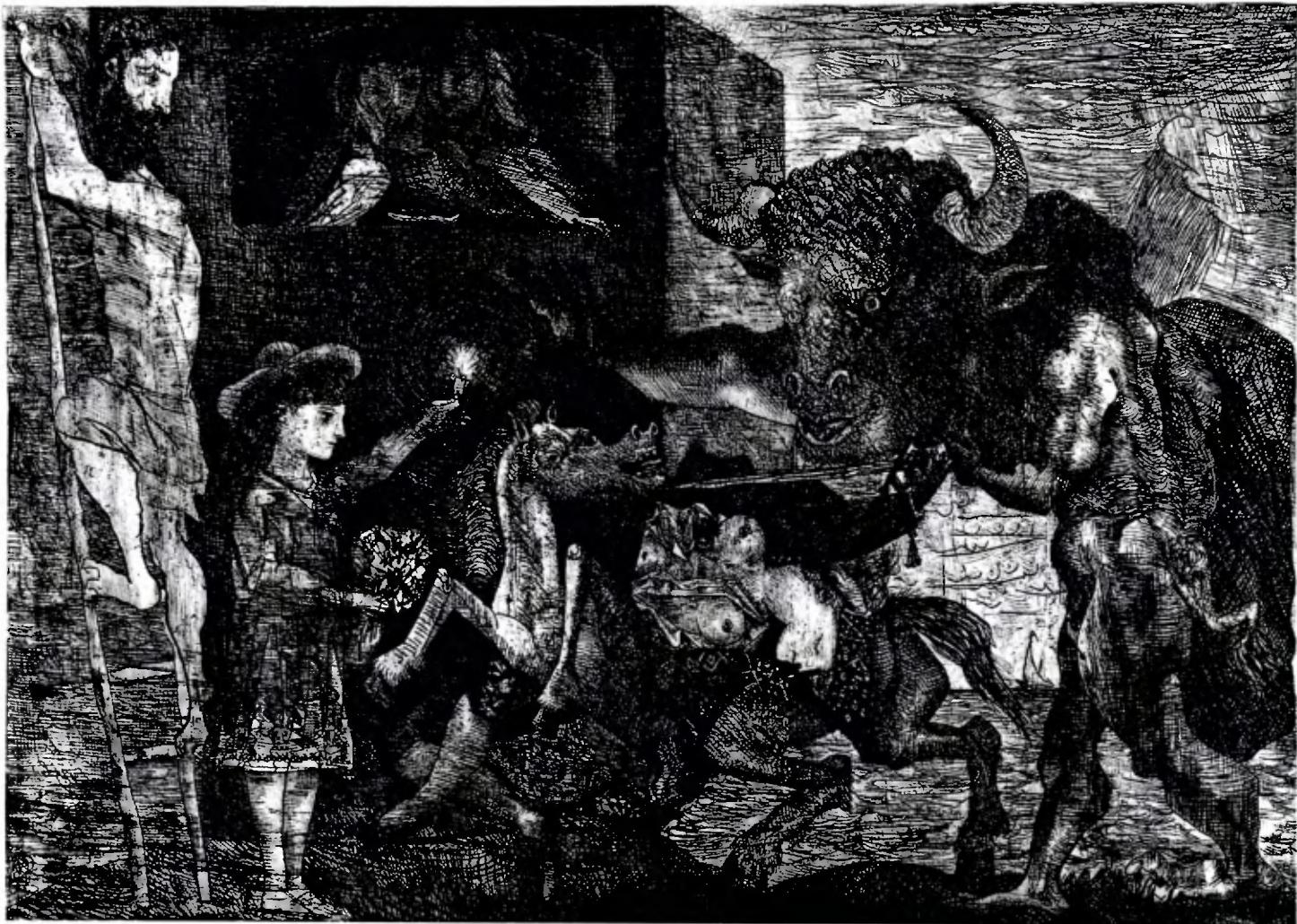
3 • Installation view of *Guernica*, as installed in the Spanish Republican pavilion, behind Alexander Calder's *Mercury Fountain*

vast studio on rue des Grands Augustins, which had been acquired by the Spanish government especially for this occasion. The extensive sketching and the size of the canvas clearly signaled Picasso's resolution to transfigure the mural commission with a monument commemorating the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War.

A sequence of photographs recorded by the artist Dora Maar, Picasso's lover at the time, allows us to track the minute and meaningful changes performed throughout *Guernica*'s production. In these changes, as Sidra Stich and Francis Frascina have argued, Picasso responded to the ongoing political debates of the moment. Thus, when the artist drew a large round sun above the wounded horse and added a sheaf of wheat to the fist of the prostrate soldier held up in the manner of the Communist salute (May 13, state 11), only to remove these symbols in the next phase, and to replace the

sun with a prosaic lamp and lightbulb, the artist's increasing doubts about the conflicts between the anarcho-syndicalist and the Communist factions in Spain were formulated. But Maar's "news-reel" photographs also recorded Picasso's artistic doubts, as when he added at one point large segments of wallpaper to the painting to make it appear as a gigantic Cubist collage, only to remove these remnants of a lost formal radicality in the next phase in order to homogenize the painting's photographic simulation and grisaille textuality. Maar's last photograph was taken on June 4 and about a week later the painting was delivered to the pavilion. Apparently, Picasso told Sert: "I don't know when I will finish it. Maybe never. You had better come and take it whenever you need it."

The preparatory drawings and an extensive collection of Maar's photographs were published by Christian Zervos, the editor of



4 • Pablo Picasso, *Minotauromacy*, 1935

Etching and engraving, plate: 49.6 x 69.6 (19½ x 27¾)

Picasso's *catalogue raisonné*, in two issues of Zervos's magazine *Cahiers d'art* devoted in part or entirely to *Guernica*. In issue no. 12 (Summer 1937) and the special issue no. 13 (November 1937), essays by Jean Cassou, Michel Leiris, the Spanish poet Jose Bergamin, and Zervos himself were published. Cassou initiated the painting's irresistible rise to a mythic status of an essentially Spanish art by comparing it to Goya:

Goya is brought back to life as Picasso. But at the same time Picasso has been reborn as Picasso. It had been the immense ambition of his genius to keep himself forever apart, denying his own being, making himself live and carry on outside of his own realm—like a ghost frenzied to see his vacant home, his lost body. The home has been found again, both body and soul. Everything that calls itself Goya, that calls itself Spain has been reintegrated. Picasso has been reunited with his homeland.

After the closure of the Spanish pavilion, the painting embarked on an international journey through European countries and was exhibited to support the Spanish Republic and to bring the

barbaric acts of Franco's fascism to international attention. During the summer of 1938, Roland Penrose and the Belgian Surrealist E. L. T. Mesens and a committee including Virginia Woolf, Douglas Cooper, and E. M. Forster, sponsored its exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries in London before it continued to the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the east end of the city. As an involuntary irony of history, the painting arrived on the day of the infamous Munich Agreement, September 30. Herbert Read had to respond to Anthony Blunt's second attack on the painting (in his essay "Picasso defrocked") by mobilizing the equation between Goya and Picasso once more:

It is not sufficient to compare the Picasso of this painting with the Goya of the Desastres. Goya too was a great artist, and a great humanist; but his reactions were individualistic—his instruments irony, satire, ridicule. Picasso is more universal: his symbols are banal, like the symbols of Homer, Dante, Cervantes. For it is only when the commonplace is inspired with the intensest passion that a great work of art, transcending all schools and categories, is born and being born lives immortally.

Shortly after the tragic end of the Civil War on March 28, 1939, Picasso decided that *Guernica* should be shipped to the United States, declaring that the painting should not return to Spain until a democratic government had displaced Franco's regime. The painting arrived in New York aboard the *Normandie* on May 1, 1939, exactly one month after the United States had recognized Franco's government. After its initial presentation at the Dudensing Gallery in New York, it toured the United States (being shown at the Fogg Museum at Harvard, in Los Angeles, and in Chicago, among other sites), and it was finally installed on the walls of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where it would remain for forty-two years. Inevitably, once on display at the foremost museum of modernism, all specific references to the Spanish Civil War would disappear and the formalist and aestheticizing readings would take over. Thus, ▲ already in 1946, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., director of the Museum, wrote:

The composition is clearly divided in half, and the halves are cut by diagonals which together form an obvious, gable shaped triangle starting with the hand at the left, the foot at the right, and culminating at the top of the lamp in the center—a triangle which suggests the pedimental composition of a Greek temple.

But the commentaries by artists and critics in New York—many at that time still being on the political left—differed dramatically from those formalist responses. Thus, Elizabeth McCausland, one of the foremost critics of her time, who had already seen the painting during its installation at the Spanish pavilion, argued strongly for sustaining the painting's political interpretations after it had arrived in New York:

The result is a canvas of amazing complexity, imbued with aesthetic ideas and concepts from Cubism, Abstractionism, neoclassicism and the psychological period. But all these attributes are only means to an end. Picasso has used the skill and dexterity of his method to convey a message.... He wants to cry out in horror and anguish against the invasion and destruction of the Spain of his love. He wants to protest with his art against the betrayal accomplished by Franco and his fascist allies.

But not all political voices were equally convinced of *Guernica*'s success as a work of political protest. The Marxist art historian and critic Max Raphael, who had emigrated from Berlin via Paris to New York, where he would encounter *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art, formulated a response that was comparable to Blunt's initial skepticism since he underlined the painting's (and modernism's) general constitutive dilemma to address proletarian audiences and claim public speech, yet to deliver its appeals in structures that would inevitably appear as cryptic if not esoteric: "This is a contrived painting and hence arbitrary and finite. This accounts for the fact that the masses—and the anti fascist masses most particularly—were perplexed by it and quickly lost interest. The literati only praised it in their turgid fashion."

While the painting's impact would become evident in the works of many American artists of the thirties and forties, for example ▲ Arshile Gorky (who participated in a roundtable discussion about the painting at its first American showing at the Dudensing Gallery), or Willem de Kooning, *Guernica*'s imprint was particularly deep • for Jackson Pollock, as Lee Krasner's account testifies: "Picasso's *Guernica* floored me. When I saw it first at the Dudensing Gallery, I rushed out, walked about the block three times before coming back to look at it. And then later I used to go to the Modern every day to see it." Pollock's drawings produced at that time while undergoing treatment with his psychoanalyst Dr. Henderson resonated for years with *Guernica*'s impact, culminating in the quotation of mythical animal hybrids in paintings such as *Pasiphae*—the Minotaur's mother—or *The She Wolf* (both 1943), an iconography Pollock finally abandoned with the billboard-size mural for Peggy Guggenheim in 1943, generally perceived to be his breakthrough painting.

Animal icons: the Minotaur and Micky Mouse

Picasso's citations of the seemingly transhistorical imagery of mythical animals fractured the responses to *Guernica* from the start. Some considered the bull to be the embodiment of Franco's fascism; others read it as the image of the Spanish people. The confusion between the Minotaur (previously a cipher of Picasso's proclaimed supernatural male identity, as in the numerous images preceding the *Minotauromacy* aquatint) and the bull on the one hand and the horse on the other made it almost impossible not to read the depiction of the animals as opposing forces, male and female, fascist and Republican, victor and victim. Even when Picasso finally and exceptionally assented to interpret *Guernica*'s iconography in his conversation with Jerome Seckler for New York's leftist magazine *The New Masses* in March 1945, he not only reiterated the conflicts constitutive of modernist political art in general, but also intensified the painting's interpretive ambiguities:

The bull there represents brutality, the horse the people.... Yes, there I used symbolism, but not in the others.... The bull is not fascism but it is brutality and darkness. My work is not symbolic. Only the Guernica mural is symbolic. But in the case of the mural that is allegorical.... There is no deliberate sense of propaganda in my painting ... except in Guernica. In that there is a deliberate appeal to people, a deliberate sense of propaganda.

Thus, one could argue that the painting's communicative deficiency originated in the ambiguity of the animal imagery, as much as in the work's ambiguity of genre, suspended between mural painting and photomontage, as Romy Golan has argued:

Picasso was able to address the tension between aura and exhibition value that underlay the Paris 1937 World's Fair. By devising a hybrid, an alloy, a Minotaur—not half man and half bull but half painting and half photomural, half allegory in the

old sense and half that of montage—Picasso struck at the heart of the aesthetic and ideological vicissitudes of the thirties.

Rather than analyzing and historicizing fascism, Picasso insisted on mythifying the elements of violence and war, endowing the painting with a humanist universalism that would guarantee its artistic fame in the future. This becomes all the more palpable when we compare the animal imagery used by John Heartfield to support the Spanish Republic in a 1936 photomontage that appeared in *Volks-Illustrierte*, the renamed *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* that had moved from Berlin to Prague after the Nazis came to power, and was used as a cover for Ilya Ehrenburg's antifascist book *No Pasaran* [5]. In distinct contrast to Picasso, Heartfield made the very impulse to transfigure historical reality into a timeless representation of a fabled animal itself part of his critical derision. His animal image is historically concretized when he literally

situates the "Condors" (as the Nazi pilots had named themselves, after all) politically and ideologically by endowing the heads and breasts of these birds with Spanish and German fascist kepis and badges, but also by singling out only one precise element of their animal "essence," the vultures' penchant to attend imminent death, as in this case when the "Condors" were bringing about the destruction of Republican Spain.

Picasso's preoccupation with the Minotaur and hybridized anthropomorphic and mythical zoomorphic figures emerges at the same moment as Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse (with his first movie appearance in *Steamboat Willie* in 1928) and Donald Duck (the figure's first movie was appropriately entitled *Don Donald* in 1937), the perfect American counterfigures to an apparently never-ending European preoccupation with Greek and Roman myths as the continent's cultural foundations. Therefore the increasing intertwinement of myth and rationality, and the various historical,



5 • John Heartfield, *Madrid 1936*, from *Volks-Illustrierte* (VI, Prague), no.15, November 25, 1936



6 • Roy Lichtenstein, *Donald Duck*, 1958

Ink on paper, 50.8 x 66 (20 x 26)

psycho-social, and political/ideological pressures on the patriarchal bourgeois subject found dialectically opposed articulations in both spheres. On one hand, certain factions of the so-called avant-garde, still operative in Paris, resorted to the mobilization of images derived from the supposedly transhistorical myths of Mediterranean culture to articulate the crisis of subjectivity. Thus Picasso's interest in the human/animal hybrids deploys the classical mythical imagery (in Freud's wake) to articulate the newly discovered permeation of conscious rationality by the violent forces of the unconscious. Yet it simultaneously formulated the anxieties over the imminent demise of the bourgeois Cartesian subject, once having been supposedly controlled by reason and self-determination, or it might even respond already at that moment to the confrontation with the emerging aegis of fascism. Picasso's animalistic iconography therefore oscillated between a Surrealist critique of obsolete models of humanist subject formations and a contemplation of proto-fascist celebrations of irrationality. Both Frascina and Ginzburg have recently suggested that *Guernica* incorporated elements from Georges Bataille's new political encoding of the ancient Minotaur and the acephalic figure as an explicit rejection of idealism. Bataille supposedly associated these monstrous hybrids with the experiential conditions of the proletarian masses and proposed these images as counter-figures to the "asexualized and noble heads of the bourgeoisie, which we will cut." But Ginzburg also alerts us to understand that "Bataille's attitude towards fascism was deeply ambiguous. He was fascinated by its aesthetic of violence, by its excesses. But he also insisted on several occasions that fascism had to be fought on its own battleground, in the sphere of mass emotions."

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic a new desubjectivization was propagated by the emerging mass-cultural formations. The comics were one among many textual and iconic innovations to provide the image regime and behavioral rules of the dissolution of social and subjective experience. Not surpris-

ingly, the critical interpretation of these phenomena would be constantly shifting as well. This is evident in the debates about Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck by some of the figures' earlier admirers and most trenchant critics such as T. W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Sergei Eisenstein—a dialectical condition equally illuminated by the noteworthy detail that Paul Dessau, one of Weimar's most important composers and collaborators with Bertolt Brecht, who had early on composed for Disney films in Berlin (1926–8), wrote his first dodecaphonic piano concerto entitled *Guernica* after seeing the mural at the Spanish pavilion in 1937.

Thus a complex historical undercurrent linked the anti-bourgeois, antirationalist and antihumanist image of the Minotaur with the proletarian counteridentification in the mass cultural imagery of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. Both shifted between a subversion of bourgeois patriarchy and a fascification of the dismantled individual in mass-cultural subjection. As Miriam Hansen has argued in her brilliant essay on the subject:

The problem was compounded with the more acute insight that these capacities, indeed the very concept of experience, were being held hostage by a bourgeois humanist culture that had tied them to the perpetuation of social privilege, to aestheticism, escapism, and hypocrisy.... The decline of experience is troped into an opportunity to abolish it altogether; the "new barbarism" of experiential poverty appears as the proletarian alternative to a moribund bourgeois culture.

It is this intertwining of mythical icons and its grisaille of technological rationality that *Guernica* would introduce to a newly emerging iconography of a dismantled subject in American painting. *Guernica's* initially celebratory echoes in American painting of the forties, as in the works of Gorky, de Kooning, and Pollock, tried to sustain painting's privileged access to the presumably mythical depths of the unconscious as the site of a more elevated and deeper definition of subjecthood. Yet slowly and steadily these would be replaced by an acceptance of precisely those mass-cultural transformations of subjectivity that would eventually surface in Roy Lichtenstein's citations of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck when he articulates opposition against the humanist legacies of the New York School at the end of the fifties [6]. BB

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Romy Golan, *Muralnomads: The Paradox of Wall Painting Europe 1927–1957* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009)
Jutta Held, "How do the political effects of pictures come about? The case of Picasso's *Guernica*," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1988, pp. 38–9
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348 1942a The depoliticization of the American avant-garde reaches the point of no return when Clement Greenberg and the editors of *Partisan Review* bid farewell to Marxism. YAB

353 1942b As World War II forces many Surrealists to emigrate from France to the United States, two shows in New York reflect on this condition of exile in different ways. HF
box • **Exiles and émigrés** HF
box • **Peggy Guggenheim** RK

358 1943 James A. Porter's *Modern Negro Art*, the first scholarly study of African-American art, is published in New York as the Harlem Renaissance promotes race awareness and heritage. AD

364 1944a Piet Mondrian dies, leaving unfinished *Victory Boogie Woogie*, a work that exemplifies his conception of painting as a destructive enterprise. YAB

369 1944b At the outbreak of World War II, the "Old Masters" of modern art—Matisse, Picasso, Braque, and Bonnard—consider their refusal to flee occupied France as an act of resistance against barbarity: discovered at the Liberation, the style they had developed during the war years presents a challenge to the new generation of artists. YAB

The depoliticization of the American avant-garde reaches the point of no return when Clement Greenberg and the editors of *Partisan Review* bid farewell to Marxism.

In July 1942, an “Inquiry on Dialectic Materialism” appeared in the second issue of the international journal *Dyn*, founded and edited in Mexico from 1942–4 by the Austrian artist Wolfgang Paalen (1907–59). It consisted of a set of three questions that Paalen had sent to two dozen “distinguished scholars and writers,” and of the answers (not everyone replied). The questions were: (1) Is Dialectic Materialism (the philosophy of Marx and Engels) “the science of a veritable ‘dialectic’ process”?; (2) Is the dialectic method elaborated by Hegel itself scientific (independently of its appropriation by Marxism), and if so, “does science owe important discoveries to this method”?; and (3) Are the laws established by Hegel in his *Logic*, laws which form the ground of his dialectic method, universally valid and useful?

Breton’s spiteful silence

The addressees—a complete list of whom was provided—had been chosen both because they had not yet, or not recently enough, expressed their view on the matter and for their lack of direct involvement in “practical politics.” Half of them responded.

▲ The most conspicuous among those who did *not* was André Breton, the founder of Surrealism, until then a fervent and efficient supporter of Paalen’s art. The artist had been one of the scenographers of the famous “Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme” in Paris in January–February 1938, and in June of the same year Breton had prefaced an exhibition of his *fumages*, paintings realized by quickly grazing a smoking candle over a freshly prepared surface, and then editing the results—as always when the Surrealist conception of automatism is involved [1].

Had he answered, Breton would have disagreed with the majority of the respondents, who answered “No” to all three questions. Breton’s admiration for Marx and Hegel never diminished, and Stalin’s regime, of which he had been one of the harshest critics ever since the beginning of the Moscow trials in 1936, was for him doubly criminal in that its barbaric acts were committed in the name of dialectical materialism. But Breton’s silence was motivated by spite: in the first issue of *Dyn*, published in April 1942 and which he had received in New York, where he had been living for less than a year, he had stumbled upon his protégé’s treason, that is, Paalen’s short but abrasive “Farewell to Surrealism.” “In 1942, after all the



1 • Wolfgang Paalen, *Ciel de Pieuvre*, 1938
Fumage and oil on canvas, 97 x 130 (38½ x 51½)

bloody failures of Dialectic Materialism and the progressive disintegration of all isms,” Paalen claimed, one could no longer turn a blind eye to Surrealism’s summary endorsement of certain of Marx’s and Hegel’s “too simplistic conceptions.” Similarly discarding the movement’s adherence to Freud’s axiomatic principles concerning the fundamental role of unconscious desires in all human conduct, particularly the creative act, Paalen advocated greater familiarity with “the conquests and methods” of physical sciences on the part of artists, but dismissed allegiance to any one system of thought as dogmatic and constricting.

Breton did reply to Paalen, albeit indirectly, in the “Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else,” which appeared in June 1942 in the first issue of *VVV: Poetry, Plastic Arts, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology*, a new Surrealist journal that he had launched in New York in 1940 (though the official editor was the sculptor David Hare [1917–91]). Reaffirming the spirit of rebellion that had always animated Surrealism, Breton rejected blind faith in any theoretical system, and, alluding to both Marxism and psychoanalysis, directly echoing Paalen’s essay, he underlined how easily an “instrument of liberation” can be transformed into an “instrument of oppression,” noting in passing that even science and mathematics are not immune to such a fate. Neither is Surrealism, implied Breton when denouncing what he called “a certain

Surrealist conformity," by which he meant the academicization of Surrealist practices in the American art world and their commercialization in the fashion and movie industries. (This seems to have been when Breton coined the anagram "Avida Dollars" to dislodge Salvador Dalí, who epitomized this trend in his mind). The oddest pique, illustrating Breton's point that "man might not be the center of the universe," was reserved for the anthropomorphic (and thus nonmaterialist) conception of the animal kingdom manifested by an "exceptional" (materialist) thinker whose hand "had presided over some of the greatest events of our time," when speaking to him four years before, in Mexico, about the "natural" devotion of his dog. The brilliant thinker in question was Leon Trotsky, who, as a political refugee, Breton felt he could not publicly name—if anything, however, the strange allusion rightly points to the centrality of Trotsky (whose assassination by Stalin in 1940 had deeply affected Breton) for anyone concerned with the role of culture at this dire moment of history.

The American Artists' Congress

The Russian leader was certainly on the mind of several respondents to *Dyn*'s inquiry who were actively involved, as editors or regular contributors, with the anti-Stalinist, New York-based literary journal *Partisan Review*, founded in 1934. These included Meyer Schapiro, Dwight Macdonald (1906–82), Philip Rahv (1908–73), and Clement Greenberg—the latter offering at least some explanation for his triple negative answers and adding that he "wished he could say yes." Most of them had espoused radical politics in the early thirties, as had the artists whom their journal was beginning to celebrate (soon to become the heroes of Abstract Expressionism, these had formed several unions and leftist organizations during their tenure at the WPA). When in the summer of 1935 Moscow had initiated the strategy of the Popular Front, intended to create an international alliance of intellectuals against fascism, these young men had volunteered their help and even embraced, momentarily, the cause of a "proletarian" art and culture, whereas Breton had been quick to detect the Stalinist trap, and immediately responded with a violent attack on the cultural politics of the USSR and a defense of artistic freedom.

A highlight of their growing involvement had been the first meeting of the American Artists' Congress, held in New York in February 1936, at which Schapiro read his paper, "The Social Bases of Art," where he harshly criticized the individualism of the modern (abstract) artist as political escapism that pandered to a new class of wealthy, dilettante patrons. (In the same breath, Stuart Davis, one of the organizers of the Congress, definitively broke with his long-time friend Arshile Gorky for his refusal to join in.)

The three show trials held in Moscow between August 1936 and March 1938 made the first serious dent in this youthful enthusiasm (though certain individuals, such as Davis, stubbornly stayed the course for several more years). Schapiro recanted his earlier antiformalist sermon in "The Nature of Abstract Art," a brilliant

review of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s exhibition "Cubism and Abstract Art" at the Museum of Modern Art. (The review appeared in the short-lived journal *Marxist Quarterly* in January 1937.) Abstract art, Schapiro now claimed, was interacting with its historical context no less than any other art form, and was thus perfectly able to play an active role in it. Meanwhile *Partisan Review*, which had merged with a journal published by the Communist Party at the time of the first American Artists' Congress, had suspended publication in October 1936, to reappear only in December 1937, this time with a position closely allied to that of Trotsky whom a "commission of inquiry" chaired by John Dewey in April of that year had declared innocent of the crimes of which Stalin had accused him.

As early as July 1937, the editors of the future reincarnation of *Partisan Review* had courted Trotsky, then exiled in Mexico, hoping to obtain his contribution. Although appreciating their devotion, Trotsky delayed his decision until he had received some issues of the journal. His verdict was devastating: writing to Macdonald in January 1938, he snarled that for all their intelligence and education, the editors of *Partisan Review* basically had "nothing to say." Instead of "searching for themes that would not hurt anyone," the journal should follow the example of the artistic avant-garde movements ("naturalism, symbolism, futurism, cubism, expressionism and so on") which had always advanced their position by using the shock tactics of polemic and scandal. Trotsky's reluctance had not lessened two months later when he sent a letter to Rahv, but his insistence that the journal should keep an "eclectic" openness in aesthetic matters and support any "young and promising artistic movement" that came along indicates that for him cultural policy had become an important element in his struggle against Stalin. Trotsky finally gave in: the decisive factor was André Breton's arrival in Mexico in May 1938, of which Trotsky immediately informed the journal, even recommending the French poet as a contributor! (Ironically, it was Meyer Schapiro who had been instructed by Trotsky's secretary to send the Russian exile any of Breton's writing that he could find in New York.)

Breton had been in Mexico for less than a month and was in almost daily contact with him when Trotsky wrote an open letter dated June 17 to the editors of *Partisan Review*, published in its August–September 1938 issue as "Art and Politics." Its conclusion was particularly energizing: "Art, like science, not only does not seek orders, but by its very essence, cannot tolerate them.... Art can become a strong ally of revolution only insofar as it remains faithful to itself." The principal result of Breton's visit, however, was the manifesto "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art" calling for the formation of an International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art, which he coauthored with Trotsky. The name of Diego Rivera replaced Trotsky's as cosignatory of the text when it was published worldwide, including in *Partisan Review* during the late fall of 1938 (even though Rivera, in whose house Trotsky was then living, had not taken the slightest part in its writing), because the Russian thought the manifesto would have more weight—especially as it condemned any enslavement of art by political forces—if

it came from two creators, especially if they were from different persuasions. Just in case people had any doubt about his stance, Trotsky sent for publication in the following issue of *Partisan Review* a letter congratulating Breton—who by then had long since returned to Paris—on having joined forces with Rivera, and once again affirming that “the struggle for revolutionary ideas in art must begin with the struggle for artistic truth, not in terms of any single school, but in terms of the immutable faith of the artist in his own inner self.”

The manifesto itself remains one of the most extraordinary documents of the period, notably for its appeal to both Marx and Freud, thus anticipating the Freudo-Marxism of Herbert Marcuse thirty years later. Its immediate effect on the art world was great. Greenberg quipped—in 1961, in a retrospective essay about the thirties—that “some day it will have to be told how ‘anti-Stalinism,’ which started out more or less as ‘Trotskyism,’ turned into ‘art for art’s sake,’ and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.” In his first major essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” published in *Partisan Review* in the fall of 1939, his analysis of the role of modernist art as a Trojan horse in a bourgeois society, and as the last rampart against barbarity, owes a lot to Breton and Trotsky’s tract. For left-wing artists who had militated in Communist-infiltrated organization and had then been devastated by the Moscow trials, this signaled the end of a desiccating paralysis: not only was it all right not to follow the party line, but one did not have to think about one’s art as primarily a mere instrument of the Revolution—Trotsky himself was saying so. Furthermore, despite his refusal to endorse any aesthetic program officially, Trotsky was singling out not only Mexican muralism (unsurprisingly, given the long history of political commitment by its artists) but also Surrealism!

By the time Stalin and Hitler signed a pact of nonaggression (August 23, 1939) and Soviet Russia invaded Finland (November 1939), any idea of a Popular Front had lost all credibility. Even Stuart Davis, who had long behaved like a Communist Party henchman, could no longer kid himself. He publicly resigned from the American Artists’ Congress (the Popular Front’s institutional voice in the US art scene), as did Schapiro, with Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and many other young artists in his wake. Meanwhile, in March 1939, Rivera’s wife, Frida Kahlo (1907–54), had attended the exhibition “Mexique” organized and prefaced by Breton (obviously nostalgic about his recent trip to that country) at the exclusive Parisian art gallery Renou & Colle. There she met Paalen and invited him to come to Mexico: not even waiting for the outbreak of war, which many predicted though hoping for a miracle, he arrived in Mexico City via New York, where he stayed a few months, in September 1939. Two years later, the beginner American artist Robert Motherwell (1915–91) had joined Paalen, having gone from New York to Mexico with the Chilean Roberto Matta (1911–2002), another of Breton’s young recruits. He remained in Mexico further to perfect his Surrealist education under Paalen’s guidance.

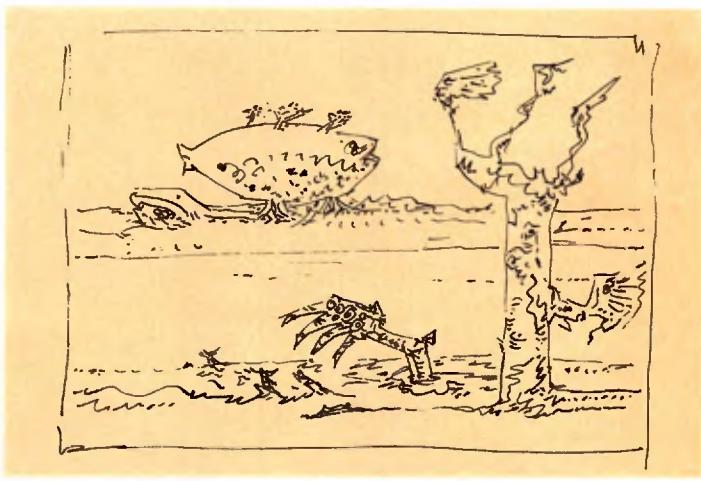
The Surrealists regroup in New York

The outbreak of the war and the influx of immigrants from Europe radically changed the situation of Surrealism in New York. The vociferous attacks against the movement as “escapist” had more or less died down (except from the discredited Stalinist wing), and its presence on the literary and artistic scene, as well as its attraction for young American artists, had grown at a spectacular pace. The first Surrealist painters to emigrate had been Kurt Seligmann (1900–62), Yves Tanguy (1900–55), and Matta, in November 1939. A few months later, they helped prepare the escape from occupied France of those who had not been prescient (or fortunate) enough to leave before, most notably rallying American support for the Emergency Rescue Committee that Varian Fry, an editor and classicist from New York, had courageously set up in Marseilles without help from (and even in defiance of) the US government. The Committee first secured André Masson’s and Breton’s exit (they finally arrived in New York in May 1941, after a stressful stay in Martinique, which was administered by the collaborationist French government), then ▲ that of Max Ernst, who finally rejoined his friends in July.

This regrouping of the Surrealist troops in New York could only further stimulate the interest of a young generation of artists already aroused by a series of lectures on the movement delivered, at Schapiro’s invitation, by Matta’s and Paalen’s friend, the painter Gordon Onslow Ford (1912–2003) at the New School of Social Research in January–February 1941. An exhibition of Surrealist art, curated by Howard Putzel, accompanied the lecture series, which • was attended by Motherwell and Gorky, but also Jackson Pollock, William Baziotes (1912–63), and Gerome Kamrowski (1914–2004), the latter three convening in Kamrowski’s studio, quite possibly immediately after one of Ford’s talks, and pouring oil and enamel on a “collective painting” [2]. Galleries and museums were playing their part too. A month after their immigration to the United States, Tanguy was offered a one-man show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery,



2 • Collective painting by Baziotes, Kamrowski, and Pollock, 1940–1
Oil and enamel on canvas, 48.9 × 64.8 (19½ × 25½)



3 • André Masson, *Paysage Iroquois*, 1941

Indian ink on paper, 21 × 38 (8 1/4 × 15)

where he would exhibit again in 1942 and 1943, and Seligmann at Nierendorf's (where he would show again in 1941, before moving to another gallery). Paalen's April 1940 exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery, which quickly became something of an official gallery of Surrealist art, was immediately followed by Matta's, his work being shown together with Walt Disney's sketches for *Pinocchio!* Masson's retrospective opened at the Baltimore Museum of Art in October 1941, and in the following month the Museum of Modern Art presented a large retrospective of Miró (who had refused to leave Europe) in tandem with one of Dalí's art, though by then his Surrealist credentials had vanished, thanks to his profascist pronouncements. Ernst, too, was celebrated, not only through exhibitions but also by the special issue devoted to his work by the Surrealist-friendly journal *View*, directed by Charles Henri Ford. The culmination of this public exposure took place in the fall ▲ of 1942, soon after the arrival of Marcel Duchamp in New York. In "First Papers of Surrealism," scenographed by Duchamp, young American artists such as Baziotes, Hare, and Motherwell were invited for the first time to show their work side by side with veterans of the movement such as Seligmann, Masson [3], Ernst, and Tanguy (not to mention Matta); its opening was followed a week later, ● on October 20, 1942, by that of Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, "Art of This Century," where her important collection of Surrealist art was presented in a curved space specially designed by Frederick Kiesler.

Despite all this activity, however, there was a certain *ennui* around the Surrealist movement as a whole. At least, Breton felt it, though he would have been the last to admit it: the art presented by the younger generation was clearly derivative, showing a particular fondness for the imaginary landscapes of Tanguy and the "automatic" gesturality of Masson, and these old-timers, in turn, were mainly resting on their laurels. The only exception was Matta, who in 1937, then a twenty-six-year-old student of architecture, had been the youngest recruit of the Surrealist movement and hailed by Breton as its bright new hope. By 1940, he had learned how to translate, in large and colorful paintings, his drawings of bio/mechanomorphic creatures floating in fantastic sci-fi decors that had seduced Breton [4]. The

clash between a rational, perspectival space and the oneiric irrationality of the figures that populate it had been at the core of much

▲ Surrealist painting, and Matta was not fundamentally departing from this model. But he was leaving aside the finicky *trompe-l'oeil* technique upon which the riveting effect of Tanguy's or Dalí's art mostly depended. In freeing his painting from the constraints of this academic studio practice and in welcoming sweeping gestures and automatism within the highly controlled stage of his cosmic landscapes, he had, almost despite himself, been led to a dramatic change of scale which struck his young American colleagues. Furthermore, his energy seemed boundless, his missionary zeal remarkably efficient. Soon after the "First Papers of Surrealism" exhibition, he set up a workshop where for a few months he "taught" pictorial automatism to Baziotes, Motherwell, Pollock, and a few others.

Breton had always been an authoritarian leader unwilling to share his power. He was wary of Matta's growing ascendancy in the New York art world, feeling that, despite Matta's allegiance and his orthodox discourse on the marvelous and the necessity of elaborating new myths (principles which Breton's "Prolegomena" had recently reaffirmed), these were not what was attracting Matta's young devotees. If Breton did not watch out, a new school, over which he would have no control whatsoever, was going to emerge from the ashes of Surrealism. Coincidentally, Breton stumbled upon the work of Armenian-born Arshile Gorky (1904–48)—whom he met in the winter of 1943–4 while Gorky was working on his formidable *The Liver is the Cock's Comb* [5]—and decided to champion his art.

Gorky's Surrealism becomes Abstract Expressionism

Paradoxically, however, Matta had been determinant in Gorky's development. Until around 1942–3, "among the painters in New York, Gorky stood out for years as the masterly apprentice," writes Meyer Schapiro. Until 1938 he was learning the language of Picasso, then he switched his attention to Miró. "In Matta," pursues



4 • Roberto Matta, *Years of Fear*, 1941–2

Oil on canvas, 111.7 × 142.2 (44 × 56)

5 • Arshile Gorky, *The Liver is the Cock's Comb*, 1944
Oil on canvas, 186 × 249 (73 1/4 × 98)



Schapiro, "[Gorky] found for the first time a painter whose language, once mastered, he could use as freely himself. From Matta came the idea of the canvas as a field of prodigious excitement, unloosed energies, bright red and yellows opposed to cold greys, a new futurism of the organic as well as of mechanical forces. Gorky could draw his own conclusions from Matta's art without waiting for the inventor."⁶ Liberated from copying by this "younger brother" who, among other things, encouraged him to paint more thinly (until then his canvases had been crusted with heavy impasto), Gorky took flight.

Without discarding all the lessons of his long schooling, he added all the marks of an exuberant gesturality, including multiple run-offs of paint, to what he had learned from Picasso (dissociation of form and contour), Miró (biomorphic figures), Kandinsky (saturated color), Matisse (transparency of the paint layer, which allows for an active role of the underlayers), Matta (sci-fi landscape, amoebic decor), and even Duchamp (whose *Large Glass* he greatly admired). Until his suicide in 1948, he produced at top speed works that could only be called Surrealist because Breton acclaimed them, but which Pollock, ▲ Newman, and other Abstract Expressionist painters immediately regarded as the seed of their own movement.

Always a loner, Gorky had been flattered by Breton's praise, and he flattered the French poet in return by letting him give titles to his canvases, but he steadfastly refused to play the part of a faithful member of the Surrealist group. In 1947, like Picasso before him, when Breton's demands became too pressing, he bade him farewell. Unlike Paalen's departure five years earlier, however, Gorky's defection signaled the end of Surrealism. YAB

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6 • Arshile Gorky, *How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life*, 1944
Oil on canvas, 101.6 × 114.3 (40 × 45)

As World War II forces many Surrealists to emigrate from France to the United States, two shows in New York reflect on this condition of exile in different ways.

In 1929 the Surrealists published a map of the world in the Belgian journal *Variétés* [1]. It shows just two capitals, Paris and Constantinople, and redistributes land mass according to the artistic sympathies of the group. As the homes of the more “fantastic” tribal art favored by the Surrealists, Alaska and Oceania (the South Pacific) are vast, while Africa, the home of the more “formal” art already exploited by the Cubists and the Expressionists, is shrunken. Political affiliations also play a major role: Russia remains large, while the United States does not exist, and Germany and Austria have subsumed Europe entirely—though not yet ominously. Now flash forward nine years to 1938, to the first “International Exhibition of Surrealism” in Paris, only months after the Nazi condemnation of modernist art, the “Degenerate Art” show, had opened in Munich. Among the works in Paris was a Surrealist object by Marcel Jean (1900–93) titled *Horoscope* [2], a dressmaker’s dummy with plaster ornaments for its base and arms and a watch inset at its headless top. Jean painted the dummy a glossy blue, on which appears a gold-and-gray figure that is gradually disclosed to be both a map (some continents encircle the hips of the dummy) and a skeleton (we can make out its ribs). The two works convey the different moods of the two moments: the 1929 map bespeaks an imaginative appropriation of the world that wittily rewrites it according to Surrealist interests, while the 1937 horoscope-hourglass forecasts a deathly world, with its time running out. The first shows a Surrealism on the creative march; the second suggests a Surrealism that, however international, is on the political run.

The exhibition as “exquisite corpse”

By the thirties the exhibition had become a principal form of Surrealist activity. It could articulate political protest, as it did in “The Truth about the Colonies,” a small counterexhibition to the official jingoistic Colonial Exhibition held in Paris in 1931; or it could announce an aesthetic shift, as it did in the “Surrealist Exhibition of Objects” at Galerie Charles Ratton in Paris in 1936, which showed radically diverse things—tribal art, Picasso constructions, mathematical objects, as well as such Surrealist objects as Meret Oppenheim’s famous *Fur-Lined Teacup* (*Déjeuner en fourrure*). The exhibition could also promote the international acculturation



1 • *The World in the Time of the Surrealists*, first published in *Variétés*, 1929
Offset, printed in black, page size 24 x 17 (9½ x 6¾)

of Surrealism, as in the “International Surrealist Exhibition” at the New Burlington Galleries in London in the summer of 1936, and in “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” curated by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. at the Museum of Modern Art in December of the same year.

The objects in these shows were often bizarre, but the installations remained rather conventional. This changed dramatically with the “International Exhibition of Surrealism” in Paris in 1938, for here the narrative quality of the typical Surrealist object was extended into the actual space of the exhibition. No precedents existed for this sort of show: it was opposed to the rationalist displays proposed by various Constructivists in the twenties, such as the Demonstration Room of El Lissitzky, but it was also distinct from the anarchistic manifestations of the Dadaists, such as the 1920 Berlin Dada Fair. At the same time, to the extent that the Surrealist exhibition proposed an active, participatory viewer, it was closer in spirit to these other avant-gardist experiments than to any traditional form of exhibition with its passive, contemplative spectatorship. It should come as no surprise that, along with André Breton and Paul Eluard, the “générateur-arbitre” (producer-referee) of the show was none other than Marcel Duchamp, already the veteran of several exhibition controversies and recently the curator of his own miniature museum, the *Boîte-en-valise*. “All exhibitions of painting and sculpture make me ill,” Duchamp wrote his patron Jacques Doucet in 1925, two years after he seemed

2 • Marcel Jean, *Horoscope*, 1937

Painted dressmaker's dummy, plaster, and watch, height 71.1 (28)

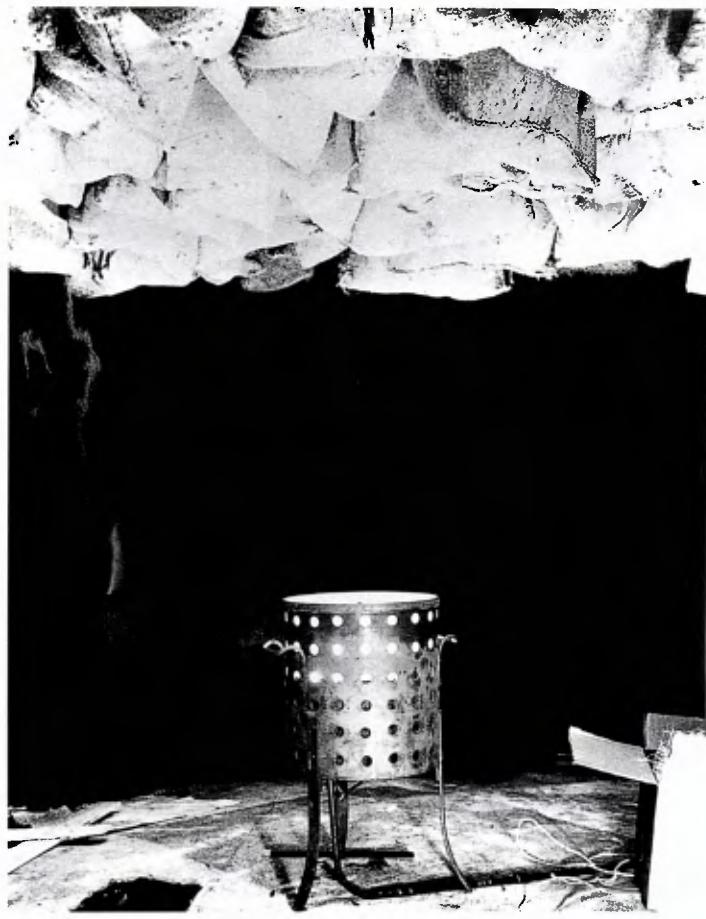
to withdraw from all forms of artmaking. "And I'd rather not be involved in them." Apparently this inhibition did not extend to the orchestration of such events.

The first "International Exhibition of Surrealism"—and it was international, with sixty artists from fourteen countries—opened on January 17, 1938, at the Galerie Beaux-Arts. Owned by Georges Wildenstein, who also published the magazine *Beaux-Arts*, this upscale gallery was located in the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, a high-bourgeois venue that led to charges that the Surrealists had sold out, politically as well as economically. Yet Duchamp did all he could to refashion its elegant eighteenth-century interior into a dim urban underground that undercut its high-art ambience. (Moreover, as if to underscore the commercialism of the context, he hung graphic work on revolving doors redolent of department stores.) The exhibition appeared to be a deranged narrative along the lines of the Surrealist game "exquisite corpse," in which different players drew different parts of a figure or wrote different parts of a sentence, each unbeknownst to the other; but in fact its layout was quite calculated. As soon as one stepped indoors, one seemed to be outdoors again, for in the lobby stood *Rainy Taxi* by Salvador Dalí, an old cab entwined with vines, drenched by rain, and occupied by two mannequins—a driver with a shark's head and dark goggles, and a female passenger covered with live Burgundian snails, a kind of "Birth of Venus" as Lady of the Night.

Already at this point Dalí played to a degraded notion of "Surrealism"—*Rainy Taxi* was so popular that it was re-created for the 1939 World's Fair in New York—and he was soon purged from the Surrealist ranks as much for his blatant commercialism (Breton renamed him, anagrammatically, "Avida Dollars") as for his outrageous expression of Nazi sympathies.

The theme of prostitution continued in the passageway that led from the lobby to the two galleries; it was decorated as a "Rue Surréaliste" with street signs (mostly fictitious, such as "Rue de la Transfusion de Sang") and sixteen female mannequins bizarrely dressed (or undressed) by Dalí, Miró, Ernst, Masson, Tanguy, Man Ray, and others. (Typically, Duchamp cross-dressed his mannequin with shirt, coat, tie, and hat, but no pants.) This passageway, which again confused interior and exterior, opened onto the main space, which combined other versions of indoors and outdoors. On the floor were dead leaves, moss and dirt, a small pond encircled by reeds and ferns, and, in each corner, a double bed with silk sheets. *Horoscope* stood at the foot of one bed, while various Surrealist pictures, such as *The Death of Ophelia* by Masson, hung on the walls. In short, the gallery was made up as a dream space, one with its own contrived logic. It was very dark: Duchamp had wanted the paintings on the walls to be illuminated by the approach of viewers, as in a peep show; when this could not be rigged, Man Ray, in his capacity as "master of lighting," handed out flashlights during the opening, with much the same effect of semi-lewd peering. (Duchamp would return ▲ to this positioning of the spectator in his diorama *Etant donnés*.) Attached to the ceiling were "1,200" coal bags, emptied of coal (due to insurance precautions) but dirty with dust nonetheless, while in the center of the floor stood a charcoal brazier [3]. (Almost thirty ● years later Andy Warhol "would play with a Pop, postindustrial version of these sacks—helium-filled pillows that he let float as "silver clouds" through a gallery show.) Here was another conflation of spaces—of industrial work and artistic entertainment—further complicated, with the coal sacks on the ceiling, by an inversion of up and down. To top off this mélange of signifiers of art and prostitution, commerce and industry, Dalí hired a dancer, Hélène Vanel, to perform a simulation of hysteria titled "The Unconsummated Act"; and by some accounts, insane-asylum laughter and German military music were also piped into the galleries.

This last note must have struck a grim chord, for during the week of the opening Nazi bombs fell on Barcelona and Valencia. Perhaps the political frame of the Spanish Civil War made the changed social status of Surrealism all the more obvious. For many of the Surrealist gestures in the show were almost conventional by the late thirties: once a figure of the uncanny, the mannequin had ■ become a Surrealist cliché, difficult to distinguish from its use in fashion, which had adopted such Surrealist devices as the dreamlike invocation of desire, sometimes with the assistance of the Surrealists. At the same time, Surrealism was embraced by high society, which was out in full force and evening dress for the opening of the 1938 show: once provocative politically, Surrealism had become chic in an *outré* sort of way. Yet had the Surrealists



3 • Marcel Duchamp, *1,200 Coal Bags Suspended from the Ceiling Over a Stove*, 1938

Environment for the "International Exhibition of Surrealism," Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris

simply withdrawn from the street to the salon, from political engagement to artistic spectacle (as some have charged)? Or did the 1938 show not disrupt accepted oppositions of interior and exterior, private and public, subjective and social? Perhaps the two developments are not mutually exclusive.

In any case, as Man Ray once remarked, the installation did "destroy that clinical atmosphere that reigned in the most modern of exhibition spaces," and here again we must place it in the context of its moment, for the year 1937 witnessed two very different models of museum display. On the one hand, there was a quasi-objective ideal of display put forward by the state-sponsored exhibition of ▲ museology at the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris, in which the proper techniques of "judgment, presentation, and protection of patrimony" were laid out ("noiseless rooms, evenly distributed lighting, studied floor and ceilings, appropriately sober surfaces, standardized labels, effusive wall text about the artists and works"), all designed to reassure viewers that "the exhibition space was neutral, the work of art autonomous, aesthetic appreciation disinterested." Obviously the Surrealist show flew in the face of this putatively scientific program. On the other hand, there was the opening just five months before of the twin Nazi demonstrations in Munich: the "Great German Art" exhibition, which laid out the reactionary aesthetic of Nazi kitsch, and the "Degenerate 'Art'" ● show, which equated modernist art (including Surrealism) with

moral depravity and mental illness in a large display of pilloried works. The Surrealist show also mocked this fiercely ideological use of museum display. (Might Duchamp have sought to echo—that is, to exacerbate—this riotous installation in his own?)

The exhibition as labyrinth

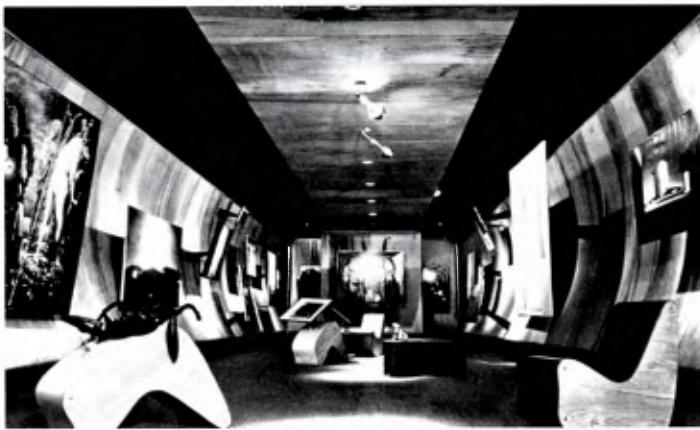
A year later, with the fall of France to the Nazis in 1939, the condition of the Surrealists changed utterly—from international expansion to escape and emigration, mostly to the country that did not exist on their 1929 map, the United States. In New York, along with such ▲ magazines as *VVV* (guided by Breton) and *View* (edited by the American poet Charles Henri Ford), the exhibition remained a primary medium of Surrealist activity, and it now had the additional function of a banding-together of exiles. A pair of near-simultaneous exhibitions in New York in 1942—"Art of This Century" and "First Papers of Surrealism"—dramatized these changed circumstances.

Exiles and émigrés

Ironically, the claim of New York to be "the capital of modern art" by mid-century depended in no small measure on the flight of many European artists and intellectuals from the rise of Hitler and the outbreak of World War II. Hitler came to power in January 1933; by September his Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels had formed the Reich Chamber of Culture to administer all artistic production according to Nazi criteria. Outspoken critics of Nazism like Georg Grosz and John Heartfield had to leave Germany immediately—Grosz for the States, Heartfield first for Prague, then for London. Other avant-gardists, such as Kurt Schwitters, also found haven in England. If there were any doubts about Nazi policy concerning modernism, the "Degenerate 'Art'" show laid them to rest in 1937.

One of the first acts of the Nazis was to close the Bauhaus. The Russian-born Wassily Kandinsky fled to France, the Swiss-born Paul Klee returned to Switzerland; many others, such as the American-born Lyonel Feininger, came to the States. The American reception of Bauhaus architects, such as Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, was already prepared by a landmark show on the "International Style" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932. Six years later MoMA produced the exhibition "Bauhaus: 1919–1928," which also advanced the reputation of these émigrés. By this time László Moholy-Nagy and Marcel Breuer had joined Gropius and Mies, as well as Josef and Anni Albers, in the US.

The exodus of French artists came mostly after France fell to the Nazis in 1939. By 1941 André Breton and Fernand Léger had arrived in New York, along with other celebrated modernists such as the Dutch Piet Mondrian, the German Max Ernst, and the Russian Marc Chagall; Marcel Duchamp followed the next year. Even as some French artists disdained American culture, they also helped translate European modernism for young American artists—not only the immediate group of Abstract Expressionists but also the subsequent circle of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and others.



4 • Installation view of the Surrealist Gallery designed by Frederick Kiesler in "Art of This Century," New York, 1942

One thing had not changed, however: the embrace of socialites, such as the American Peggy Guggenheim, an heir to a copper-mining fortune, who had left Europe with her husband Max Ernst on July 14, 1941. To exhibit her collection of modernist art amassed in Europe, Guggenheim opened a gallery-museum called "Art of This Century" on October 20, 1942, in two converted tailor shops at 28–30 West 57th Street. The architect was Frederick Kiesler (1890–1965), a young associate of the De Stijl group, once active in Vienna but now resident in New York, who was already known for his avant-garde theater designs (in 1929 he had designed the first theater in United States specifically for film, the Film Guild Cinema on West 8th Street). Kiesler divided "Art of This Century" into four spaces: one for temporary shows and three for fixed exhibitions of the collection, each of which was styled after the art on display. With blue walls and turquoise floor decided by Guggenheim, the Abstract Gallery suspended its unframed paintings on wires that ran from ceiling to floor in giant vs both parallel and perpendicular to the walls. The Kinetic Gallery displayed several paintings by Paul Klee on a conveyor belt, while another device showed the *Boîte-en-valise*, one work at a time, through a peephole. More unusual still was the Surrealist Gallery [4]. Here Kiesler called for bowed walls made of gum-wood, from which he projected Surrealist paintings supported by batlike struts at different angles; meanwhile his biomorphic chairs doubled as sculpture stands. Like Duchamp before him, Kiesler wanted to control the lighting—to illuminate one side at a time for two minutes each, to have the gallery pulse "like your blood."

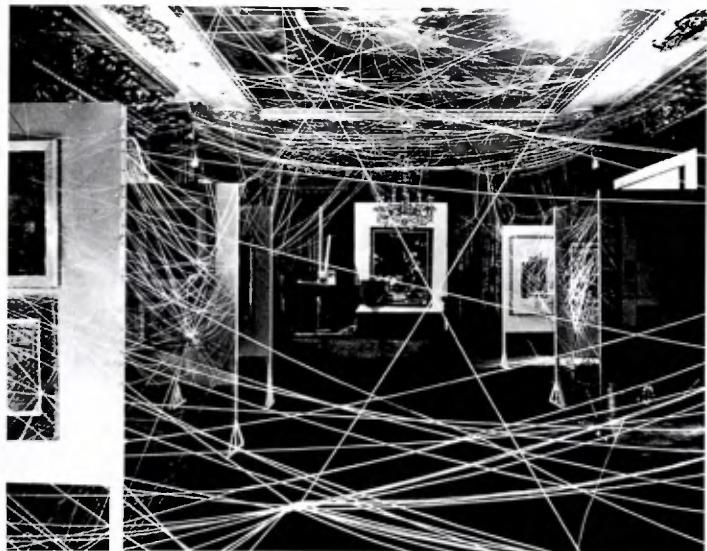
This last ambition aligns Kiesler with the Surrealist vision of an "intrauterine" architecture that Dalí, Tristan Tzara, and Roberto Matta had proposed in articles of the thirties, and Kiesler elaborated in his "Endless House" project of 1950. Here is Tzara on such architecture in 1933, from the magazine *Minotaure*: "When it is understood that comfort resides in the half-light of the soft tactile depths of the one and only possible hygiene, that of prenatal desire, then circular, spherical, and irregular houses will be built again, which man kept from cave to cradle and to tomb in his vision of an intrauterine life, and which the aesthetics of castration,

called modern, ignore." And here is Matta (who once worked for Le Corbusier) in 1938, also from *Minotaure*: "We must have walls like wet sheets that get out of shape and fit our psychological fears." Kiesler designed out of a similar fantasy of return to a primordial space of creation: in his Surrealist Gallery he sought to "dissolve the barrier and artificial duality of 'vision' and 'reality,' 'image' and 'environment'... [where] there are no frames or borders between art, space, life. In eliminating the frame, the spectator recognizes his act of seeing, or receiving, as a participation in the creative process no less essential and direct than the artist's own." In effect Kiesler wanted to disguise the mediation of the gallery in order to simulate the immediacy of psychic space—hence the removal of conventional supports like frames, partitions, and bases.

The American critic T. J. Demos has interpreted this "fusional installation design" as "a response to the anomie of exile"—more specifically, as an attempt to move away from the old Surrealist exploration of the uncanny (in German *Unheimlich* or unhome-like) toward a new Surrealist myth of "a habitable and conceivable world" (as Breton described it at the time). Duchamp, in his own 1942 installation of Surrealist art, "First Papers of Surrealism," which opened a week before "Art of This Century," projected a different kind of world again—more alien than uncanny but certainly not homelike. "[The Surrealists] had a lot of confidence in the ideas I could bring them," Duchamp later remarked to Pierre Cabanne, "ideas which weren't anti-Surrealist, but which weren't always Surrealist, either." "First Papers of Surrealism" was a benefit exhibition for war prisoners, sponsored by the Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies at the Whitelaw Reid Mansion (451 Madison Avenue). The designer Elsa Schiaparelli asked Duchamp to install the exhibition and, along with Breton and Ernst, he chose works by roughly fifty artists—mostly old Surrealist

• warriors, but also some new American associates, such as Joseph Cornell, Kay Sage, David Hare, William Baziotes, and Robert Motherwell. The title, "First Papers," refers to application forms for US citizenship, and it could be read either as an optimistic statement of a new life or a bitter mockery of all official identification at the height of World War II. Also ambiguous was the most celebrated gesture of the show—the tangle of string a mile in length that Duchamp wound all around the main gallery in a way that not only obscured the paintings but also obstructed entry to the space [5].

Duchamp had used string before: only three meters' worth in his 1913 experiment in "canned chance," *Three Standard Stoppages*, and different lengths in his 1918 *Sculpture for Traveling*, made up of strips of shower caps of various colors attached by string and stretched to the four corners of his studio at 33 West 67th Street. This work, which Duchamp took with him on a 1918 sojourn to Buenos Aires, bespeaks both a sense of displacement (in the traveling of the title) and a strategy of occupation (in the installation of the piece). The string in "First Papers" exacerbates the displacement, and turns the occupation into its near-opposite—obstruction—for again the tangle impeded access to the gallery. Several readings were offered of this tangle: for some witnesses



5 • Marcel Duchamp, *Sixteen Miles of String*, at "First Papers of Surrealism," 1942
Vintage silver-gelatin print, 19.4 × 25.4 (7 1/2 × 10)

(like Sidney Janis and Arturo Schwartz), it was a figure of the difficulty of all modernist art; for others (like Marcel Jean), it was a trope of age like a cobweb, though whether this age was one of veneration or decay was not clear. Still others dismissed the entire show as a tedious tangle. Certainly the installation played on the Surrealist fascination with the labyrinth as a figure of the unconscious (with the man-beast Minotaur at its center), a figure that it seemed to transform into an allegory of contemporary history, or rather of a breach in this history marked by war and exile, a breach that distanced the Surrealist art on display, almost literally, from the present. From this angle, the exhibited artists were posed as contemporary Ariadnes with little hope of finding their way out of the maze. If such an allegorical account appears dubious, we can simply state that the string obscured both pictorial and architectural spaces in a way that at once underscored and interrupted the given frames of painting and gallery alike. In any case, it was a negative, almost nihilistic gesture, but typically Duchamp presented it as playful, for he asked a group of children to play ball in the gallery for the duration of the opening. Nonetheless, the installation was hardly the "fun house space" that John Cage recalled of "Art of This Century."

While Kiesler wanted to do away with frames in order to render Surrealist art somehow immediate, Duchamp worked to elaborate frames excessively into a literal maze, as if to resist the institutional acculturation of this art. This difference has led T. J. Demos to see Surrealism-in-exile as torn between a search for a "compensatory home," as represented by Kiesler, and an acceptance of a profound homelessness, as represented by Duchamp. This seems right; however, circumstances changed again with the end of the war. In 1947 the two friends collaborated on the design of yet another "International Exhibition of Surrealism," now back in Paris. Their installation returned to the model of a deranged narrative used in the 1938 exhibition in Paris: the viewer had to pass through a series of tests in a sequence of spaces before looking at the works

Peggy Guggenheim (1898–1979)

Peggy Guggenheim was one of the greatest collectors and most passionate supporters of avant-garde art in the twentieth century. When she died, her collection included works by Kandinsky, Klee, Picabia, Braque, Gris, Severini, Balla, van Doesburg, Mondrian, Miró, Ernst, de Chirico, Tangy, Dalí, Magritte, Pollock, Motherwell, Gorky, and Brauner. She also collected sculpture by Brancusi, Calder, Lipchitz, Laurens, Pevsner, Giacometti, Moore, and Arp. In 1920, she moved from the United States to Paris, where the minor Surrealist painter Laurence Vail (whom she would marry) introduced her to a bohemian world that included Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Anaïs Nin, Max Ernst, and Samuel Beckett.

Her collecting began as a function of the first gallery she opened, in London in 1938 (modestly called Guggenheim Jeune), with Duchamp as her adviser. The opening exhibition was of the drawings of Jean Cocteau, and succeeding exhibitions featured Tangy, Kandinsky, Arp, and Brancusi. After a year she decided to open a museum of modern art in London and convinced Herbert Read to be the museum's first director. By 1940 she had entered on a campaign to "buy a picture a day," and as the war worsened she worried about where to store her collection. The Louvre in Paris turned the works down as "not worth saving," but finally she found a château near Vichy with barns large enough to house them all. With her collection in storage for the war, Guggenheim went to Marseilles, where she contributed money to the effort to arrange passage out of Europe for a group of intellectuals and artists. She eventually left in 1942 in a plane that also carried Ernst and her two children from her abortive marriage to Vail.

In New York, she married Ernst and set to work on her new gallery, "Art of This Century." The gallery arranged the first solo exhibitions of some of the major figures of the developing school of Abstract Expressionism: Pollock in 1943, Baziotes in 1944, Rothko in 1945, and Clyfford Still in 1946. Believing Pollock to be "the greatest painter since Picasso," she arranged a contract to give him \$150 a month. Lee Krasner later said:

"Art of This Century" was of the utmost importance as the first place where the New York School could be seen.... Her Gallery was the foundation, it's where it all started to happen.

on display. Here, then, the trope was neither a compensatory home nor an indefinite homelessness but a rite of return, and the narrative was one of ritual reincorporation. But at this point Surrealism had little left but such rituals, and few new initiates to go through them. In the postwar period it would dissolve into other movements altogether; it would disappear from the map. HF

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James A. Porter's *Modern Negro Art*, the first scholarly study of African-American art, is published in New York as the Harlem Renaissance promotes race awareness and heritage.

Called the "father of African-American art history," James A. Porter (1905–70) was not only a distinguished art historian but also a successful painter in his own right. His groundbreaking survey *Modern Negro Art* (1943) was the result of ten years of collecting and collating documents about the history of African-American art, from its inception to the early forties. This seminal work made visible many little-known artists, especially Porter's contemporaries associated with the Harlem Renaissance, the African-American social, literary, and artistic movement that had been gathering force since the end of World War I.

The early flowering of the Harlem Renaissance

Although its spiritual home was in Harlem, New York, the Harlem Renaissance's ideas and ideals helped it blossom into a transnational movement. Several factors led to its flowering as it promoted and celebrated the black experience in a variety of art forms. One was the "Great Migration" between the two world wars, during which more than two million black Americans migrated to northern urban centers from the rural South. This was mainly because life in the South became increasingly difficult and dangerous after the passing of the racist and segregationist "Jim Crow" laws (so called after a black minstrel show character) and the growth of the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan. This mass migration in pursuit of a new life in the more liberal North led to a growing black urban population that included academics, intellectuals, and artists, many of whom settled in Harlem.

Earlier in the century, many black people were calling for better conditions, ranging from Booker T. Washington's (1856–1915) philosophy that unskilled black Americans should focus on economic advancement to the radical activism of Harlem-based Jamaican Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) and his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), formed in 1914. Garvey's worldwide movement was both ennobling—encouraging black people everywhere to consider themselves, and to take pride in themselves, as Africans—and separatist. Believing that the rift between black communities and their white oppressors was too great, he advocated a "back to Africa" agenda, a campaign to repatriate colonial blacks and African-Americans in order to "uplift the race."

The Pan-Africanist philosophy of African-American civil rights activist and author W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), who helped to create the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, was articulated early in the century. It emphasized the shared African heritage of black Americans, which was furthered by the birth in the twenties of the literary and ideological movement known as Negritude. Created by French-speaking African and Caribbean poets, it sustained interest in the black civilizations of Africa and promoted the idea of the beauty of the race and the concept of unity between Africa's descendants.

Such thinking encouraged racial pride, a sense of nationhood and international solidarity among those of African descent. Du Bois's ideas, however, were the most important for the Harlem Renaissance: unlike Washington and Garvey, he believed that African-Americans could achieve full economic, civil, and political parity with white Americans in America. He was also passionate in his view that art, the greatest achievement of civilized man, could play a conciliatory role, and that supporting and empowering black artists would enable them to make valid and important contributions to American society as a whole.

Other factors that nurtured the Harlem Renaissance included ▲ the European modernists' interest in "primitive" African art and their appreciation of African-American dance and music, particularly spirituals and jazz—encompassing both folk and avant-garde art from the New World. Black American intellectuals, such as philosopher Alain Locke (1886–1954) realized that this fashion for all things African and African-American could, and should, be capitalized on to work for social change.

Sociopolitical, economic, ideological, cultural, and aesthetic concerns all informed the search to define the "New Negro" and to encourage a cultural renewal that acknowledged the black American's African ancestry, life and history in America, and transformation into a modern urban persona. The New Negro Movement epitomized this need: as sociologist Charles S. Johnson (1893–1956) commented in 1925: "A new type of Negro is evolving—a city Negro." This new black urbanite required a new identity that would leave behind that of ex-slave.

Sculptor Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1877–1968) is acknowledged as one of the most important precursors of the Harlem



1 • Meta Warrick Fuller, *The Awakening of Ethiopia*, 1914

Bronze, 170.2 x 40.6 x 50.8 (67 x 16 x 20)

Renaissance. She took classes at the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art before going for several years to Paris, where she ▲ studied with Auguste Rodin. After her return to the United States in 1903 her work was exhibited regularly on the East Coast, where it came to the attention of the spokesmen for the Harlem Renaissance, who were drawn to her aesthetic based on the example of African sculpture and her use of black African and American subject matter.

Fuller was inspired by Du Bois's Pan-Africanist philosophy, which is evident in her best-known work, *The Awakening of Ethiopia* [1]. Drawing on an Egyptian sculptural tradition, the bronze figure of a woman awakening from a deep sleep could be read as a call to her fellow African-Americans for a rebirth of black culture after centuries of slavery and repression. Her use of black subject matter and of explicit links between Africa and black America provided a potent example for Locke and his followers as they tried to formulate an aesthetic for the New Negro.

The New Negro

The twenties were a time of optimism, pride, and excitement for African-Americans who hoped that their time for a respectable place in American society had finally arrived. Photographer James

Van Der Zee (1886–1983), Harlem's premier chronicler of the years 1920 to 1940, provided some of the most enduring, iconic images of the era [2]. In helping to create the image of the New Negro, styling and retouching the photographs to create uplifting images of black Americans, Van Der Zee produced photographs of Harlem's residents that capture the optimism, style, pride, and sophistication associated with this new urban identity.

The leaders of the New Negro Movement—black and white American philosophers, sociologists, critics, gallery owners, and patrons—believed that through culture, rather than politics, they could achieve their shared goal of equal rights and freedoms for black Americans. They reasoned that increased exposure through black arts and literature would help mainstream society see black Americans and their experience as *part of*, rather than *apart from*, the American experience.

They also thought that black American culture could, and should, be appreciated for more than just dance and music: the academics turned to those in the arts and letters to help them. The most responsive was Locke; he wanted to found a "Negro School of Art" in Harlem to increase black Americans' visibility and awareness of their African heritage and history. Some of his thinking was informed by ▲ his experiences in Berlin during the early days of German Expressionism, when he absorbed the idealistic belief that through art the world could be made a better place. This coalesced with Du Bois's introduction and advancement of the concept of a "talented



2 • James Van Der Zee, *Family Portrait*, 1926

tenth”—the creation of an educated black elite whose mission it would be to better the lives of the less fortunate of their race.

White fascination with black America had been growing since around 1917, with the production of a number of plays and musicals featuring black themes and actors. While some were wary of this new interest, most leaders of the Harlem Renaissance saw it as the perfect opportunity to launch their black arts movement. In March 1921, Johnson organized a literary gala to celebrate young black writers at Manhattan's Civic Club, hosted by Locke with Du Bois as principal speaker, and attended by 110 literati, both black and white. Johnson's plan worked: Paul Kellogg, the white editor of *Survey Graphic*, a magazine of social and cultural issues, pitched to him the idea of a special issue dedicated to the black artists who had just been presented. The result was the March 1925 issue, "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," edited by Locke, which opened with a mission statement:

The Survey is seeking out month by month and year by year to follow the subtle traces of race growth and interaction through the shifting outline of social organization and by the flickering light of individual achievement.... If the Survey reads the signs aright, such a dramatic flowering of a new racespirit is taking place close at home among American Negroes, and the stage of that new episode is Harlem.

It featured social essays, poetry, and fiction by and about the Harlem Renaissance and was illustrated throughout by German-born artist Winold Reiss (1886–1953). His dignified and realistic black-and-white pastel portraits included both Harlem personalities and ordinary residents—teachers, lawyers, schoolchildren, and Boy Scouts. Also included were Reiss's striking black-and-white Art Deco graphics of Harlem life, portraying an exciting, vibrant, modern city. The people and the work of the Harlem Renaissance were thus introduced to a largely white literary audience via the most popular issue in the magazine's history, selling out two printings.

Its success led to an expanded book version, published later in the same year by Albert and Charles Boni. *The New Negro: An Interpretation* was a 446-page anthology of essays, short fiction, poetry, and illustrations, edited and with contributions by Locke. In a manifesto-like form, he showcased new work and called for a celebration of black history and culture, imploring artists to rediscover and appreciate their African heritage and equally to reference and build on those traditions—such as folklore, blues, spirituals, and jazz—specific to their lives as African-Americans. The book was illustrated with color pastels by Weiss, stylish caricatures by New York-based Mexican Miguel Covarrubias (1904–57) and black-and-white Egyptian-style geometric woodcuts by African-American Aaron Douglas (1899–1979).

Although Reiss rarely features in discussions of the Harlem Renaissance, he was an influential figure: his worldwide studies of native populations, which respected and drew on their folk traditions, were an important example, as were his modernist graphic

images. Thus, he was an important conduit for introducing many modernist European tendencies into American culture. Douglas, whom Locke would soon be calling a "pioneering Africanist," moved to Harlem (where he studied under Reiss) in 1924. Reiss encouraged him to move away from his strictly realist practice and to develop a style that respected his African ancestral heritage, his experience as an African-American, and modernist developments in art. He soon created an original modern black art in which the New Negro is an Art Deco silhouette. The American Precisionists' sharp angles and exuberance for the industrial landscape were harnessed toward his goal of expressing black pride and history [3]. His work quickly came to the attention of the Harlem Renaissance writers and he illustrated many of their books. Together with his illustrations in numerous magazines, this soon brought about his position as the Renaissance's "official" artist.

Individual and organizational support

With the publication of *The New Negro*, Locke became the main strategist and theoretician of the Harlem Renaissance, serving as mentor or, as he put it, "philosophical midwife," to many of its writers and artists. Existing support structures such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)



3 • Aaron Douglas, *The Creation*, 1935
Oil on masonite. 121.9 × 91.4 (48 × 36)

founded in 1909 to work for equal rights, and the Urban League, founded in 1910 to help new arrivals adjust to city life, championed the movement through their magazines: *The Crisis* (NAACP), edited by Du Bois and *Opportunity* (Urban League), edited by Johnson.

Further support and exposure came from wealthy white real-estate developer and philanthropist William Harmon (1862–1928). In 1926, achievement awards for African-Americans' contributions in music, the visual arts, literature, industry, education, race relations, and science were established under the auspices of the Harmon Foundation, which was a major patron of Harlem Renaissance artists: its annual national competition for black artists, the accompanying show and touring exhibition introduced their work to a national audience.

Artists from around the country responded enthusiastically to the Harlem Renaissance leaders' call to develop a visual vocabulary for black America. Writing to Langston Hughes in December 1925, Douglas expressed his thoughts on the matter:

Our problem is to conceive, develop, establish an art era.... Let's bare our arms and plunge them deep deep through the laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough neglected. Then let's sing it, dance it, write it, paint it.... Let's create something transcendentally material, mystically objective, Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.

The challenge was accepted and a number of different black representational possibilities were explored. A prominent strain explored by Fuller, Douglas, and others engaged heavily with the artists' African ancestry, while artists such as Archibald J. Motley (1891–1980) and Palmer C. Hayden (1893–1973) turned their attention to black folklore, history, and the minutiae of everyday life. Whether accessing a distant mythical past or nostalgia for a more recent rural past or celebrating progress and modernity, all the work of the Harlem Renaissance is involved in race consciousness and cultural identity for African-Americans.

The legacy of the first decade of the Harlem Renaissance included nationalism, primitivism, and atavism. The animated African mask in African-American Lois Mailou Jones's (1905–98) *Les Fétiches* [4], painted while she was in Paris, presents these ideas seen through a Surrealist lens. She seems both to acknowledge the Surrealists' fetishizing of the "dehumanizing" mask and to reclaim it as part of her legacy, bringing it to life as a valid ingredient in the search to define a modern black identity.

The thirties

The Stock Market crash of October 23, 1929, brought the "roaring twenties" to an end and ushered in the Great Depression. This tempered much of the idealism and optimism of the early Harlem Renaissance; in many, it strengthened their sense of racial pride and social responsibility. As private support dried up, artists turned to the Public Works of Art Project and the Federal Art



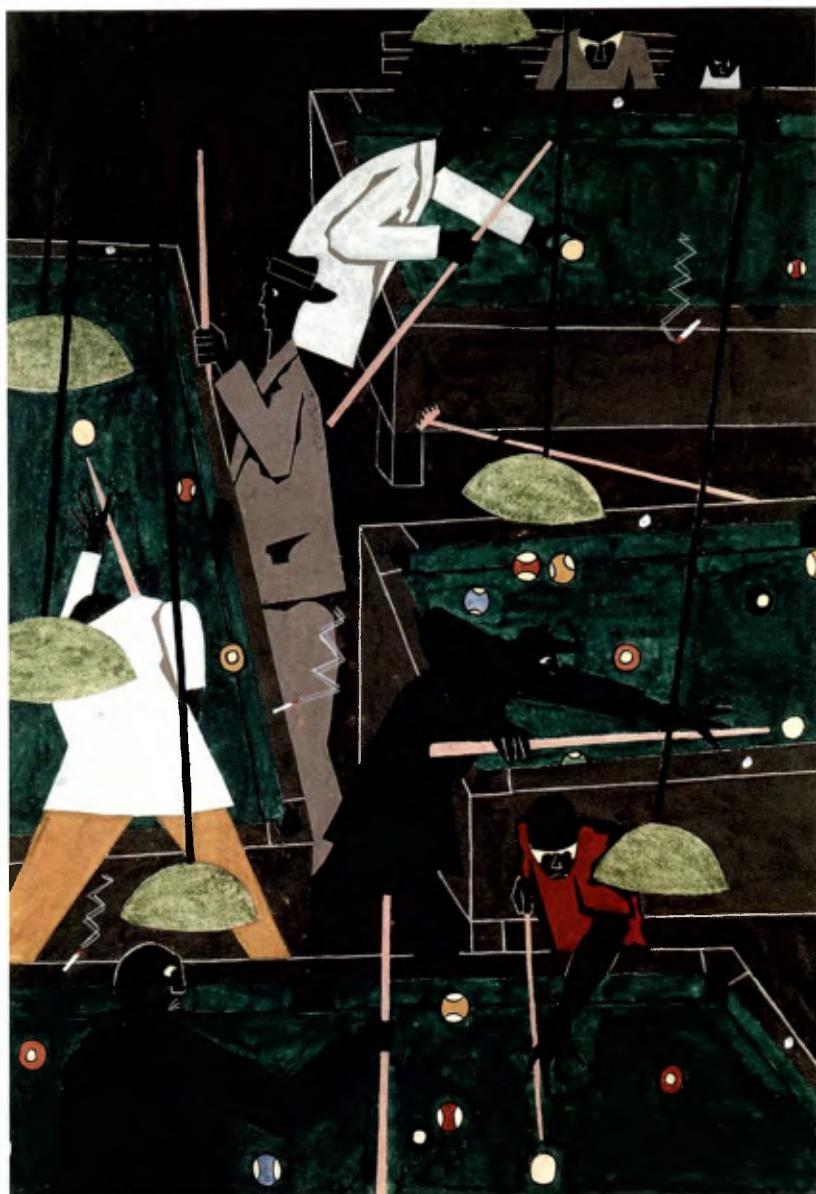
4 • Lois Mailou Jones, *Les Fétiches*, 1939

Oil on canvas, 78.7 x 67.3 (31 x 26 1/2)

▲ Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which were organized in 1933 to employ artists at craftsmen's wages to decorate public property. Artists were assigned to either easel painting or mural painting; the subject matter was all aspects of the American scene and although no specific approach was stipulated, most were working in a social realist style at the time.

A considerable number of Harlem Renaissance artists were among those who received support from the WPA. Douglas, for example, painted a mural series, *Aspects of Negro Life*, for the WPA in 1934. Mounted in the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), it brought Douglas's work to a larger audience, its monumental scale and epic quality furthering the Harlem Renaissance mission of promoting race awareness and pride and making a profound impression on the next generation of Harlem-based artists, among them Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000).

Lawrence moved to Harlem with his family during the thirties. He studied at the Harlem Art Center and spent many hours at the Schomburg Center absorbing Douglas's work and researching the struggles of the heroes of the black community. He soon developed his distinctive colorful, stylized figurative style and his central concern with the social issues and historical events effecting black Americans. Much of Lawrence's work of the late thirties was in series format, chronicling the lives of black heroes such as Toussaint Louverture (c. 1743–1803) (who was born into slavery, became a military leader and revolutionary, and established Haiti as the first

5 • Jacob Lawrence, *Pool Parlor*, 1942

Gouache and watercolor on paper,
18.7 × 57.8 (31 × 22¾)

black Western republic) and the abolitionists Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and John Brown. His best-known work, painted while working in the easel division of the WPA, is *The Migration of the American Negro* (1940–1). This landmark narrative series of sixty small paintings captures the struggles of the “Great Migration” earlier in the century. The work was a critical success: part of it was published in the November 1941 issue of *Fortune* magazine, bringing Lawrence’s work to a national audience. This early recognition led to numerous exhibitions, major museum purchases, and prizes, such as the one he won for *Pool Parlor* (5) in the “Artists for Victory” exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1942.

Norman W. Lewis (1909–79) was another young artist who began painting during the thirties in Harlem, where he absorbed Locke’s ideas. *The Lady in the Yellow Hat* (6), an early work in an abstracted figurative mode, reflects this influence as well as that of social realism, but it also points to the future, for Lewis soon began to question the

effectiveness of Locke’s theories, abandoning realistic imagery to become the only African-American Abstract Expressionist.

Lewis was not alone in questioning the Harlem Renaissance ethos. James A. Porter, who encouraged black artists to pursue personal expression rather than a separatist agenda, took Locke to task in 1937 in the pages of *Art Front* for advancing what he saw as Locke’s “defeatist philosophy of the Segregationist.” In *Modern Negro Art*, he made his stance clear, discussing African-American artists’ work not only in relation to black culture but also in the contexts of both American art history and the history of modern art.

The end of an era

After the horrors of World War II, many African-American artists felt that race-oriented, isolationist ideologies were no longer desirable or appropriate. One such artist was Romare Bearden (1912–88) who, while using black content or Africanesque symbols



6 • Norman W. Lewis, *The Lady in the Yellow Hat*, 1936

Oil on burlap, 92.7 x 66 (36½ x 26)

in his work, always strove to project something about the universal condition. In 1946 he wrote:

It would be highly artificial for the Negro artist to attempt a resurrection of African culture in America. The period between the generations is much too great, and whatever creations the Negro has fashioned in this country have been in relation to his American environment.... Modigliani, Picasso, Epstein and other modern artists studied African sculpture to reinforce their own design concepts. This would be perfectly appropriate for any Negro artist who cared to do the same ... the true artist feels that there is only one art—and it belongs to all mankind.

Elizabeth Catlett's (1915–2012) *Tired* of the same year shows an exhausted African-American woman worn out from the struggle but with the inner strength to carry on [7]. American born, but a Mexican citizen, Catlett always used the black figure as a symbol of racial and cultural pride. Her words echo the ideals championed by the Harlem Renaissance:

Art should come from the people and be for the people. Art for now must develop from a necessity within my people. It must answer a question, or wake somebody up, or give a shove in the right direction—our liberation.



7 • Elizabeth Catlett, *Tired*, 1946

Terracotta, 39.4 x 15.2 x 19.1 (15½ x 6 x 7½)

The innovative energy of the Harlem Renaissance declined with World War II, although the careers and ideas of its practitioners did not. The issues that Locke and Porter raised—what constitutes a black aesthetic; whether one should be a ‘black artist’ who creates black art or an American artist who is black—were not resolved during the Harlem Renaissance: rather, they continue to inform ▲artmaking and criticism whenever issues of identity arise. AD

FURTHER READING

- M. S. Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem and Harry N. Abrams, 1987)
David C. Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976)
Alain Locke (ed.), *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (first published 1925; New York: Atheneum, 1968)
Guy C. McElroy, Richard J. Powell, and Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Artists 1880–1987: Selections from the Evans-Tibbs Collection* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, 1989)
James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (first published 1943; Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992)
Joanna Skipworth (ed.), *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1997)

Piet Mondrian dies, leaving unfinished *Victory Boogie Woogie*, a work that exemplifies his conception of painting as a destructive enterprise.

1940–1944

Piet Mondrian died in New York on February 1, 1944. Shortly thereafter his executor and heir—the young painter Harry Holtzman, who had helped organize Mondrian's immigration to the United States—opened his studio, left untouched, to the public. The threadbare yet extraordinarily dynamic space, with its white walls transformed into screens of optical flickers by the many rectangles of pure colors that were pinned onto them, and its makeshift all-white furniture designed by Mondrian from wooden crates (again, adorned with colored rectangles), were already well known to several visitors. But very few had previously seen the unfinished *Victory Boogie Woogie* [1], even though the painter had worked on it since June 1942. It escaped none of these onlookers that there was a direct continuity between the pulsating surfaces of the walls and the staccato beat of Mondrian's last "lozangique" painting, as he called his series of square canvases rotated through forty-five degrees to stand on one corner (most commonly labeled his "diamond paintings").

This continuity was particularly enforced by the fact that not only had the black lines of classic Neoplasticism entirely vanished from the exceptionally large picture hovering on the easel, but so had *any* kind of line. One could speak only of "alignments" of tiny rectangles of color, most of them pieces of paper somewhat clumsily glued onto the canvas. But even these alignments are clearly on the verge of collapsing: they can be read only subliminally, inferred rather than seen, in most areas of the composition. Thus, to the visitors, the major difference between the walls and the painting must have seemed one of scale. Entering the box-car studio and being pulled toward *Victory Boogie Woogie* at the very end of this long pristine space, one must have had the exhilarating feeling of walking into a painting.

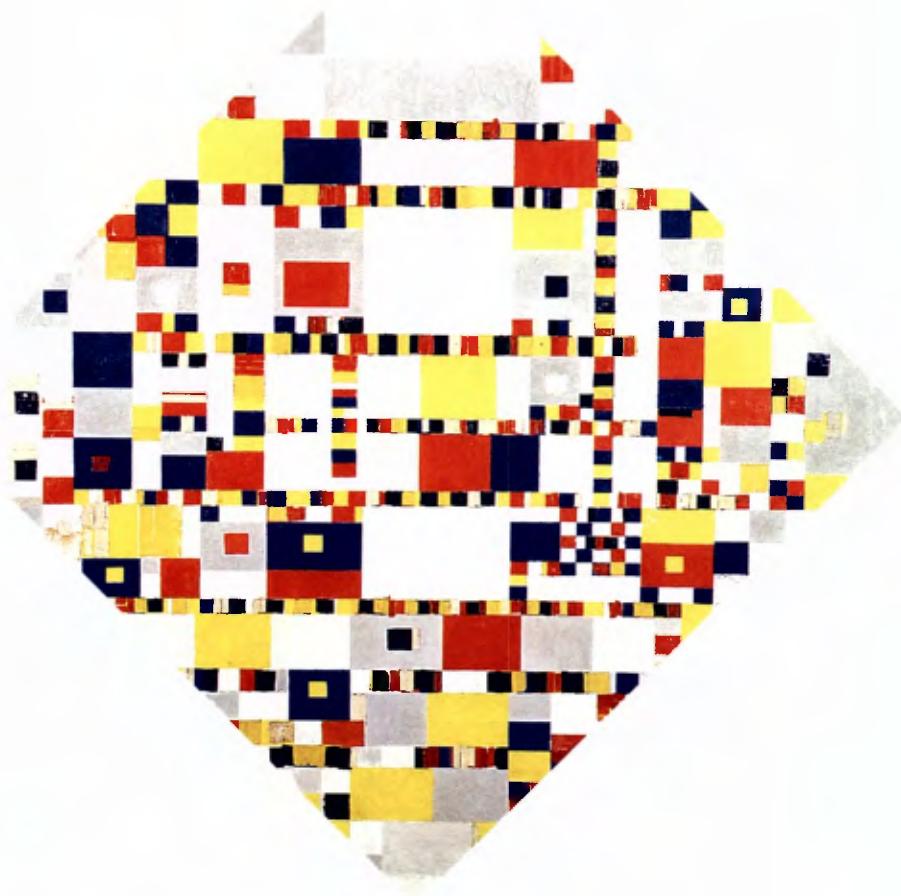
But for those who had seen this ultimate canvas before Mondrian's death, their posthumous encounter with it was a horrifying shock—in fact, among the small circle of Mondrian's acquaintances who had witnessed the painter struggling over it during the last eighteen months of his life, many shared dealer and writer Sidney Janis's verdict: it was now a ruined masterpiece.

Mondrian had several times brought the painting to a conclusion (in a photograph dating from the winter of 1942–3, one can see him putting the "finishing" brush-stroke to it). But each time

he had undone what he had achieved and, to the stupefaction of his friends, had started anew. He most certainly knew that his own end was coming, and his lifelong teleological bent had led him to assume that, if this painting were to be his swan song, it had to go further than anything he had done before. He was not interested in producing just one more painting in the electrifying style of his New York period. When a friend asked him why he kept repainting *Victory Boogie Woogie*, instead of making several pictures from the different solutions that had been superimposed on this same canvas, Mondrian replied: "I don't want pictures. I just want to find things out." During the week of January 17–23, 1944, three days before entering the hospital to be treated for his fatal pneumonia, he had "unfinished" his masterwork one more time, covering its painted surface with a myriad tiny bits of colored tape and paper—to the great sorrow of Janis et al.

But negative criticism is often more perceptive than unconditional praise. The admirers of Mondrian's classic Neoplasticism saw only destruction in this collage of the eleventh hour. In many ways they were right, and they would have been surprised to hear Mondrian agree, and agree with glee. For destruction was precisely what he had endlessly sought during the long gestation of *Victory Boogie Woogie*. The "finished" state that Janis and others had seen in his studio before the last frantic, week-long campaign was just not "destructive" enough for Mondrian: witnessing the panic of his most ardent supporters, he would have finally declared victory.

In fact, destruction had been at the very core of Mondrian's program all along. Since, right from his very first texts, he had written about the destruction of form, of the "particular," of individuality, his New York admirers should not have been so dismayed. They were not entirely at fault, however, for Mondrian had sent ambiguous signals with regard to his utopian dream of the "dissolution of art into the environment" (which he understood as a possibility for the "far distant future"): even though as early as 1922 he had determined that painting was the only vehicle within which his aesthetic principles could be truly tested by experiment, he had not gone out of his way to dissuade his early defenders from praising his art for its usefulness as a blueprint for modern architecture. By 1944, notwithstanding Mondrian's ever more aggressive statements about the fundamental role of negativity in his work



1 • Piet Mondrian, *VICTORY BOOGIE WOOGIE*, 1942–4 (unfinished)

Oil and paper on canvas, 126 × 126 (49½ × 49½), vertical axis 178.4 (70¼)

(such as “I think the destructive element is too much neglected in art”), it had become a cliché to think of him as the champion of a ▲“constructive” aesthetic (already in 1937 Naum Gabo had been utterly baffled by Mondrian’s refusal of this label).

It was in the thirties that Mondrian understood that he was not getting his message across. The posthumous publication, in ● the last issue of *De Stijl* (in January 1932), of fragments of Theo van Doesburg’s diary must have been a severe blow. There, Mondrian’s former friend compared his work to the classical painting of the seventeenth-century French artist Nicolas Poussin. At that time, indeed, through a very long process of trial and error, Mondrian’s dialectical system of composition had reached a peak, a perfect pitch where nothing could go wrong. The “negation” of one element by the other had led his paintings to be absolutely decentralized (thus achieving the destruction of the “particular” he was looking for), but they were also flawlessly balanced. Mondrian celebrated this climax in a series of eight paintings, from 1930 to 1932, all based on the same general organization. Yet such a self-satisfied rehashing (unique in his production, contrary to what one might think) soon gave way to the realization that he was “stuck.”

Never indulgent with himself, he came to the conclusion that if he had indeed reached a serene equilibrium in his compositions, this was at a terrible cost, since it hardly conveyed the sense of dynamic evolution, of everlasting perfectibility in art and life, that was so essential to his dialectical thinking. Courageously (at the age of sixty), he concluded that, in order to better enact the destruction he had always been advocating, he had above all to shatter the language of painting itself, including his own. One by one, the elements of Neoplasticism, which he had conceived as the culmination of all the art of the past, were annihilated as entities.

The first thing to be “dissolved,” as he said, was the plane. To this effect, Mondrian reintroduced a feature that he had banned from his painting since 1919 and that would utterly undermine the “classical” look of his works—that is, repetition. If until then he had conceived of repetition only as a natural (and therefore prohibited) phenomenon, it now became a favorite weapon in his struggle against identity: he multiplied the lines delimiting and linking the planes together so that “rhythm alone emerges, leaving the planes [themselves] as ‘nothing.’” Lines, which had been a secondary element in “classical” Neoplasticism, thus became the most active element, the main destructive agent, and their sheer multiplication ensured not

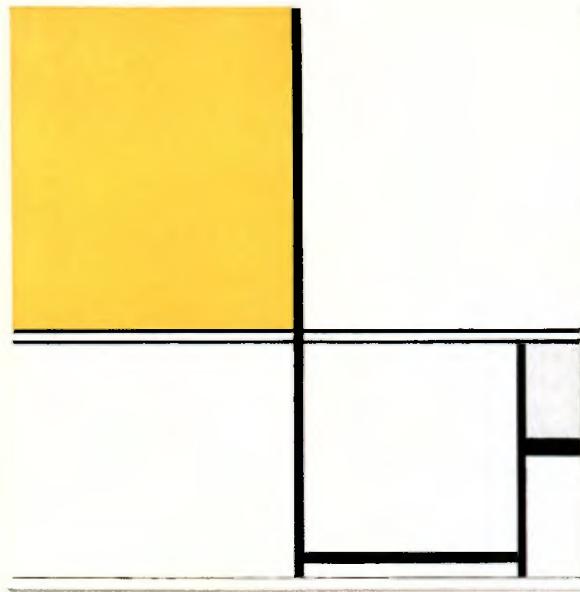
only that planes lost their “individuality” (as one cannot securely grasp a plane with multiple contours), but also that the same “depersonalization” would happen to the lines themselves.

Aesthetic sabotage

Mondrian's first attempt at such a radicalization of his pictorial program was *Composition B* of 1932 [2], based on the same compositional schema as the climactic series of the previous two years. With this work he inaugurated what he called his “double line”—two parallel black lines and their white interstice, itself perceived as a line. But while in this canvas the white gap of the double line is narrow (it is of the same thickness as the intersecting—“single”—black line), it will soon widen and (as Mondrian would write, bemused, to a friend) “head toward the plane.” And where there is no fundamental difference between lines and planes, since the line has given up its subordinate position, should there not be colored lines as well? Though Mondrian answered this question in the affirmative as early as 1933 (with the “diamond” composition of that year, *Composition with Yellow Lines*, now in the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, which bears only four “lines/planes” on a white background), it would not be until after his arrival in New York, in October 1940, that he would fully explore this possibility.

In the three years following *Composition B*, Mondrian continued to use the classical type of 1930–2 as a solid platform on which to test the sabotage of his past pictorial language. In the only two paintings completed in 1934 (one of them destroyed as “degenerate” by the Nazis), he doubled *all* the lines; in 1935, he tripled the horizontal axis of *Composition (No. I) Gris-Rouge* (Chicago Art Institute) and quadrupled that of *Composition (No. II) Bleu-Jaune* (Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.); in *Composition (No. III) with Red, Yellow and Blue* (Tate Modern, London) of the same year, this horizontal division is a “double line” whose white interstice has become wider than two of the “planes” in the picture; in the last painting of the series, *Composition with Yellow* (1936, Philadelphia Museum of Art), it is no longer really a question of double lines: instead we find a “plurality” of lines that bisect the canvas.

Mondrian's next move, during the second half of the thirties, was to transform this “plurality” of lines (ever more numerous) into a sheer scansion, an irregular pulsation of the whole surface of the canvas. Two unexpected changes resulted from this gradual filling-in of his paintings (which had once been so bare as to contain only two black lines on a white ground, as in the *Lozenge Composition with Two Black Lines* of 1931), and in both cases we witness Mondrian transgressing a taboo of his Neoplastic system: first, effects of superimposition, banned since 1917, begin to reappear (effects that Mondrian then accentuated by varying the width of his black lines); second, one notices a return of the optical flickering caused by multiple linear intersections (something he had carefully avoided since 1919). It is as if the fear of illusionism that had engendered these past proscriptions was now far less an issue than that of making sure that nothing ever remains stable. To the

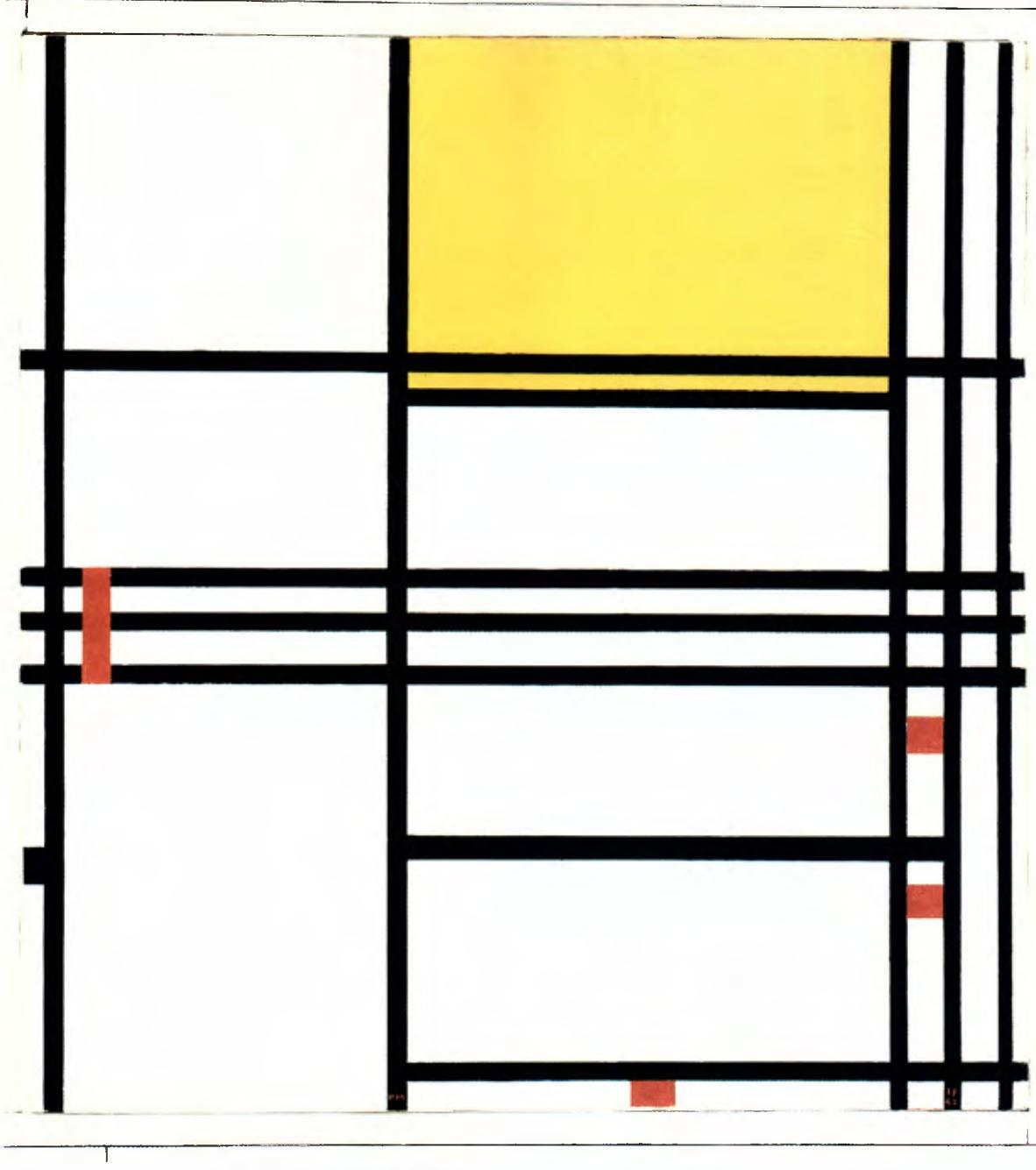


2 • Piet Mondrian, *COMPOSITION B, with Double Line and Yellow and Gray*, 1932
Oil on canvas, 50 × 50 (19½ × 19½)

variable thickness of the lines, to their multiplication and the discomforting retinal afterimage it creates, Mondrian then added a partial interruption of certain lines, which thereby cease to bisect the surface—rather, they interact to define fictive planes of a fugitive existence, forming and dissolving before our very eyes.

Mondrian's work was evolving at a rapid rate, his compositions becoming ever more complex, when, after a short interlude in Britain, he left Europe for America (he had fled Paris in 1938, mistakenly thinking that the French capital would be bombed by the Nazis—instead a bomb fell yards away from his London studio). There, after a few weeks of adjustment in New York, he took it upon himself to revise all the canvases he had brought with him (indeed all but four of the works completed in New York were begun in Europe). The myth of Mondrian's suddenly marveling at the Manhattan skyline at night is greatly exaggerated, since the changes in his art that occurred in America were more a direct consequence of an internal development than anything else. Yet there is no doubt that the urban vitality of New York (and specially the most recent jazz music that he suddenly discovered) hit Mondrian full in the face. He felt rejuvenated by the city; for the first time in his life he was acclaimed as a master and his advice was sought (it is thanks to his interest in Jackson Pollock's *Stenographic Picture* of 1942, for example, that Peggy Guggenheim gave this work a second look and ended up taking the American painter into her stable).

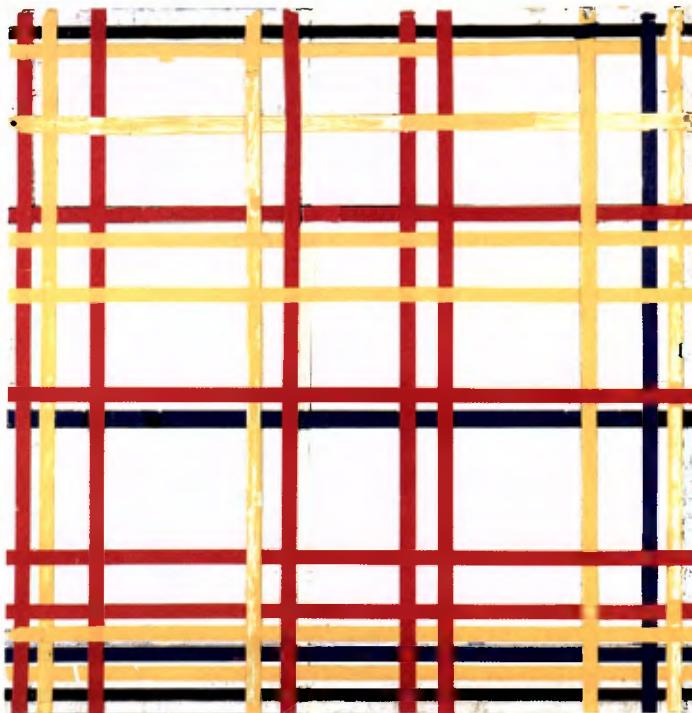
The first canvases to be reworked belong to a series of vertical compositions that Mondrian had initiated in Paris (in 1936), characterized by an “empty” bay in the center. In *Composition No. 9* [3], we can clearly isolate all the features of his late European period (superimposition of bisecting lines, moderate flicker effect [on the right], unequal length of black lines that determine fictively

3 • Piet Mondrian, *Composition No. 9 with Yellow and Red*, 1938–42

Oil on canvas, 79.7 x 74 (31 1/8 x 29 1/4)

overlapping rectangles of uncertain identity). To this vocabulary, Mondrian has added tiny dashes of color that seem to be unbounded by any restriction—one of them even crossing the stack of horizontal bars (in another canvas of the same batch, a red block cuts through a yellow plane, bringing the first color juxtaposition since 1917 into his art). Those dashes multiply and elongate in *Place de la Concorde* (1938–43), a picture titled in homage to the city in which Mondrian had started working on it, just as in the cases of *Trafalgar Square* (1939–43) and *New York* (1941–2). In this last painting, bisecting colored lines (briefly tried in 1933) reappear along with the dashes. The next step, with *New York City*, was the total elimination of black.

This work evolved from a series of paintings, once again initiated in Europe, where the sheer number of black lines crossing the canvas formed a grid, irregular, to be sure, but as optically active as that of the first two modular “diamond” paintings of 1918 and 1919. Mondrian had accepted the retinal afterimage as an inevitable by-product of the beat of lines scanning his canvases—but he was nevertheless wary of this. In *New York City*, he arrived at a solution to bypass this illusion, and he found it by pushing his enterprise of destruction of the language of painting further. During the early thirties, the plane as shape (the rectangle) had been “dissolved” by the multiple crossing of lines; then, in the late thirties, the identity of the line itself had been

4 • Piet Mondrian, *New York City I*, 1941 (unfinished)

Oil and painted paper strips on canvas, 119 × 115 (46 7/8 × 45 1/4)

abolished with the accelerated pulse of repetition, but what had remained untouched during this battle fought against the fundamentals was the ground on which lines and plane rest. It was now the negation of the ground as a geometric and physical entity to which Mondrian aspired. Thus *New York City* was conceived as a weave of colored lines that one can never reconfigure into independent virtual planes (as a red, a yellow, and a blue web) since no line of any given color behaves in a constant fashion (a red line will be above a blue one at an extremity and under at the other). But this deliberate loss of geometric identity is based on the physical unevenness of the ground: the painting is ostensibly layered, Mondrian having carefully imitated, via impasto and emphatic brush-strokes, the above-and-underneath of the braid that he had created with colored tapes while drafting the composition, as can be witnessed in the other canvases of the same series that were left unfinished [4].

The logic behind this new turn was typical of Mondrian's reduction of all phenomena to their foundational dialectic: illusionism is what happens when the ground is being optically hollowed out, but if the ground did not exist as such to begin with, if there were no geometrically continuous surface, nothing of the sort would be possible. Yet it is probably only with his penultimate work that Mondrian fully grasped this particular point. Hailed as a masterpiece (and acquired by the Museum of Modern Art when it was exhibited, freshly painted, in 1943), *Broadway Boogie Woogie* was deemed a failure by Mondrian. "There is too much of the old in it," he would say. For although no previous picture of his had so efficiently captured the syncopated rhythm that he loved so much in jazz—with its colored lines divided into long beats of yellow (the base) and short beats of red, gray, and blue, and its rare larger planes

that had become chords of three colors—this vibrant painting is devoid of the type of material weave he had created in *New York City*. In that canvas an unexpected effect of simultaneous contrast (illusionistic apparition of complementary colors) had resulted from the multiple crossing of colored lines; in *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, he had tried not to correct this effect but to give it a form by marking each crossing of the predominantly yellow lines as a square of a different color, thus furthering the atomization of these lines. But the integrity of the ground had returned in full force.

This is probably what troubled him as well in the "finished" state of *Victory Boogie Woogie*, and why he furiously appended all the bits of colored paper one can see pasted onto it today, ending up with a collage where the relative position of all elements, woven in thickness in a shallow cut of actual (not illusionary) space, is in a perpetual state of flux—where the ground has become a ghost whose only possible existence, a fleeting one, is that of appearing above the figure. YAB

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At the outbreak of World War II, the “Old Masters” of modern art—Matisse, Picasso, Braque, and Bonnard—consider their refusal to flee occupied France as an act of resistance against barbarity: discovered at the Liberation, the style they had developed during the war years presents a challenge to the new generation of artists.

In 1950, the Grand Prize for Painting at the Venice Biennale was awarded to Henri Matisse (better late than never: he was 81). He had more works included in the show than any other artist that year. Not only had the French government selected him for its pavilion (along with Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Utrillo, and Jacques Villon), but his paintings easily dominated the historical exhibition devoted to Fauvism (including, besides Matisse, works by Braque, Derain, van Dongen, Dufy, Marquet, and Vlaminck). Matisse’s presence at the 1950 Biennale amounted to a mini-retrospective, with twelve paintings in the Fauvism show and twenty-three in the French pavilion, which also included three sculptures and six drawings. With hindsight, it seems that the dice had been somewhat loaded, as though the Biennale’s organizers had worried that it could be their jury’s last chance to crown the modern Old Master, or old modern master. (In fact there would have been two more opportunities: Matisse did not die until the end of 1954.) As was often the case with Matisse’s several postwar retrospective exhibitions, a deliberate emphasis was put both on the artist’s early work and on his most recent work (done during or immediately after the war), which he was eager to present to the public. Altogether there were at least twenty-two paintings dating from 1896 to 1917 and seven from 1940 to 1948, while only six paintings covered the intervening period.

Bridging the hiatus

This time, however, Matisse hardly had to pull any strings for his strategy of “early/late and nothing in between” to be adopted: for reasons entirely different from his own assessment of his forte, the postwar strategy of the Biennale (which had closed in 1942 and reopened in 1948) was devoted to bridging the postwar present and the pre-Fascist past. The obvious goal was to erase memories of the twenties and thirties as a bad dream, and to atone for the hypernationalism (and growing antimodernism) of the Mussolini years. Nothing was better for this purpose than a latter-day version of “Sleeping Beauty.” Matisse’s evolution provided the perfect prop for the manufacture of such a collective amnesia, since it paralleled almost perfectly the life of the Biennale: the only times he had sent works to Venice were in 1920 and in 1928 during his



1 • Henri Matisse, *Still Life with Magnolia*, 1941

Oil on canvas, 74 x 101 (29 1/8 x 39 1/4)

so-called 1917 to 1930 “Nice period”; that is, when Matisse himself had turned his back on the modernism of his youth and was participating in his own way in the conservative backlash called the ▲“return to order,” a reactionary trend that the Biennale was backing with all its institutional might. However, as soon as Matisse rekindled in his work the flame of his avant-gardism of the pre-World War I years—this happened in 1931 to 1933, while he was working on the large “decoration” of *The Dance* for the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia—he was no longer welcome in Venice, and he no longer cared to send works either. But the reopening of the Biennale after World War II was carefully designed as the turning of a new page, and Matisse, who had gone through his own *aggiornamento* in the interim years, was delighted to take part in this healing event. The message it allowed him to convey to a large audience—that in his recent art he had not only gone back to the roots of his aesthetic innovation but that new shoots had sprung from these roots—was remarkably in sympathy with the politics of reconstruction common to all Europe in the immediate postwar period, an ideological program for which the Venice Biennale was the most conspicuous flagship in the sphere of artistic consumption.

It was at Matisse’s request that the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris sent to Venice *Still Life with Magnolia* of 1941 [1]

2 • Henri Matisse, *Large Red Interior*, 1948

Oil on canvas, 146 x 97 (57½ x 38¼)

and *Large Red Interior* of 1948 [2], two works it had recently acquired. *Large Red Interior* is the painter's last major canvas and one could even call it his pictorial testament: it both concludes the great series of *interiors* realized in Vence after the war, of which four others were also presented in Venice, and it inevitably recalls the *Red Studio* of 1912 in that, like this recapitulative landmark of Matisse's early career, it represents among other things some of the artist's own creations tacked on the wall amidst an ocean of pulsatile red (a large brush-and-ink drawing of 1948 and *The Pineapple*, yet another canvas of the Vence series). *Still Life with Magnolia*, similarly bathed in red, remained Matisse's favorite painting until he had completed the Vence series: it is the first important canvas done in what could be called his "old-age style," just as *Large Red Interior*, seven years later, would be the last.

The close link between the *Red Studio* and *Large Red Interior* is not merely thematic. In purely formal terms, there is no fundamental difference between Matisse's "early" mature style [▲] (that is, post-*Le Bonheur de vivre* but prior to the Nice period) and the "old-age" style just mentioned. There are more similarities than differences, to take another example, between *Still Life with*

▲ *Magnolia* and the 1910 *Music*, or the 1913 *Blue Window*—these are all purely frontal arrangements of figures floating in a field of saturated color. Yet if what distinguishes the second batch of work from the first is tenuous—the unpainted white areas that surround the objects even as these figures are traced in heavy black contours; the light of the blank canvas that shows through the brushwork—the new air of freedom these conspicuous marks of spontaneity lend to the late paintings is the direct result of a philosophy of art that Matisse had began to develop around 1935.

The word that Matisse chose to characterize his new approach was "unconscious." This was perhaps infelicitous since his notion of the unconscious had little to do with the Freudian concept and its underpinning of repressed desires. Matisse's "unconscious" was more of a "reflex," as he also said at times. In practical terms, to "rely upon one's unconscious" meant for him to adopt a two-tier working process, a technique that he initially developed in drawing. He would first patiently "take possession of his model" and learn from it everything he needed to know through what he called an "analytical study" (more often than not realized in charcoal, and with many *pentimenti*); then, only when he felt that this cumulative storing of information had reached saturation, there would be the explosive relief of the line drawing, or rather drawings, done almost as if in a trance and without any possibility of correction, his hand guided by sheer instinct, just like the acrobat or the high-wire artist who will fall if he starts thinking about what he is currently doing and its dangers. By 1941 Matisse had fully mastered this dual temporality in the graphic realm (he was understandably proud of his accomplishment and started to compile a facsimile album of drawings illustrating his method, published in 1943 under the title *Thèmes et Variations*), but he was not certain of how to implement it in painting. *Still Life with Magnolia*, one of the canvases he worked on most intensely, represents the turning-point. On the one hand, there are countless preparatory drawings for this painting (which is unusual for him); on the other hand, he erased it several times to start it each time anew until he could paint it without thinking. While the mood of this work is ominous, its frontal address to the viewer no less petrifying than that of *Music* (and, like this early painting, which [●] was in part a response to Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, no less recalling Freud's myth of Medusa's head), the technique Matisse employed there is responsible for the striking openness of all the Vence interiors. All appear to have been done in a matter of hours—and they were, if one considers only their final state; however, an unknown quantity of solvent had been used in effacing their previous incarnations, day after day. With this Penelopean process, Matisse had invented a new kind of pictorial automatism through which he felt that his lifelong goal of annihilating the gap between conception and realization could be achieved.

Matisse was seventy-nine when he painted *Large Red Interior*. Soon afterward he was definitively confined to bed. This was when he turned to another language of fusion, his paper cutouts [3]. This medium was not new in Matisse's repertoire—he had already used paper cutouts when working on the *Barnes Dance* in 1931 to 1933,



3 • Henri Matisse, *La Gerbe* (The Sheaf), 1953

Model for ceramic picture, cutout gouache, 2.9×3.4 ($1\frac{1}{8} \times 1\frac{1}{8}$)

then intermittently throughout the thirties for various decorative projects; his first major paper cutout opus, the album *Jazz*, was realized during the war, while he was temporarily bedridden (it was published in silkscreen form in 1947)—yet it is only during the last five years of his life that he had almost exclusive recourse to this means. It was particularly suitable, as was another medium he employed at the time (ceramic tiles), for working on large-scale decorative projects such as his Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, which was inaugurated in 1951. Like pictorial automatism, the paper cutouts represented a solution to a dilemma Matisse had sought to solve since the beginning of his career, this time not the split between conception and realization, but an effect of such a split, “the eternal conflict between [his] drawing and [his] color,” about which he repeatedly complained and which the coloristic outburst of ▲ Fauvism—in particular *Le Bonheur de vivre*—had been intended to address. By “drawing directly into color,” Matisse was able to maximize two sources of energy he had been employing with mastery for decades: the modulation of the intervals of white ground that animates his line drawings, and the electrifying saturation of his color.

“Old-age” style of modernist masters

Although Matisse’s career provides the best example of the “old-age” style phenomenon among modernist masters, his case is not unique. Another artist similarly celebrated by the Venice Biennale, ● this time in 1948, was Georges Braque (perhaps as a substitute for Picasso, whose political allegiance to the Communist Party, trumpeted shortly after the Liberation, compounded by his staunch opposition to General Franco’s fascist Spanish government, made him an unlikely laureate). Pierre Bonnard would not have been an absurd choice either. The particulars are different each time, but the core issue remains the same: the art of those painters who had already become famous before World War I and who had long been venerated as pioneers of modern art betrays an unexpected renewal after World War II; younger artists

emerging around 1945 had to cope with the fact that their heroes, of whom they had entirely lost sight for several years, were not only still alive but were also producing amazing new work.

Picasso was the most significant stumbling-block for the new generation (Pollock often lamented that the Spanish artist had invented everything, and he began to feel free from the senior artist’s spell only after he had come up with the drip technique ▲ in 1947). There is no massive change between Picasso’s pre- and postwar style (or rather multiplicity of styles) until the mid-sixties. But despite this surprising stylistic continuity in an oeuvre marked by discontinuities of all kinds, Picasso’s work of the late forties and fifties is colored by a general approach that is antithetical to the structuralist method, based on the oppositional nature of pictorial signs, that he had elaborated during the heyday of Cubism. It is not by chance that this later mode, which could be termed “phenomenological” (in that it presupposes a kind of empathy by which the artist attempts to know his model as if from within) is most efficiently deployed in works that are in direct but posthumous dialogue with Matisse, the perennial rival he finally felt free to honor. In the two series of paintings Picasso made with his old friend, who had just died, explicitly in mind—the *Women of Algiers* of 1955 [4], and the *Studio at “La Californie”* of 1955—the model that Picasso strives to know from within is as much the represented motif (Delacroix’s courtesans in one case; the kitsch Art Nouveau/neo-roccoco mirror-filled space of his new studio in Cannes in the other) as it is Matisse’s art (the odalisques that Picasso claimed had been bequeathed to him, and the airiness of the Vence interiors). This was not the first time that Picasso had expressly launched a pictorial colloquy with a dead master, for he had explored Grünewald’s *Crucifixion* in the early thirties; Poussin’s *The Triumph of Pan* during the Liberation of Paris; and Cranach, Courbet, and El Greco in the late forties and early fifties. In Matisse, however, he was mourning a contemporary rather than playfully toying with a distant past. This endowed these works with



4 • Pablo Picasso, *Women of Algiers* (version H), 1955

Oil on canvas, 130.2×162.3 ($51\frac{1}{4} \times 63\frac{1}{8}$)



5 • Georges Braque, *The Billiard Table*, 1944

Oil on canvas, 130.5 × 95.5 (51½ × 37½)

an unusual gravity that he retained for the subsequent series in which he investigated the Western tradition of painting (forty-five canvases directly based on Velázquez's *Las Meninas* in 1957; twenty-seven canvases and around two hundred works in various media after Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in 1959 to 1962). With Matisse's death, Picasso's world had received a blow that never quite healed. Musing on his own mortality, he would spend the rest of his long life arguing, more and more desperately, that painting as he had known it was still a game worth playing, but by the ▲ early sixties the phenomenon of the neo-avant-garde had clearly shifted the paradigm of expectations and young artists no longer deemed him relevant.

Braque's remarkable series of interiors revealed in Venice (including the first he painted, *The Billiard Table* [5]) bears signs of a liberation whose mechanism is not dissimilar from that experienced by Picasso in his "Matissean" paintings of 1955 to 1956, even if the cause is entirely different. Just as for the canvases of 1919 to 1921 (done when Braque was recovering in seclusion from the wound he had received at the front, and for once did not feel Picasso breathing down his neck) these late works magnify the artist's extraordinary technical know-how, the whole culinary aspect of painting of which he was a master without equal but that he had always tended to devalue under the peer-pressure of his sarcastic alter ego. In itself, the composition of these interior scenes is nothing but standard, one could even say academicized, Cubism, involving disjunction between color and form, multiple points of view, transparency, decomposition of the object into planes, etc., but their unusually large size underscores the materiality of the mixture of paint and sand Braque used to signify their obdurate reality as objects. Late in life, Braque was often praised for having restored a French tradition of still life that went back to Chardin in the eighteenth century, but if his interiors of the forties made an enormous impact, it is because in them he had unexpectedly switched from the intimate scale of the easel painting to the public scale of the mural.

One does not find a similar shift in scale in late Bonnard. In his *Studio with Mimosas* [6], there is nothing that was not already

present in his work from the mid-thirties onward (the subtle chromatic interplay of accumulated paint layers of various colors—a stylistic feature emulated by Mark Rothko in his mature work; the zoom effect by which Bonnard crops the visual field and propels the beholder into the luminous thicket of things). Furthermore, the size of his canvases did not augment in the postwar period. What did, though, is the looseness of his brush-strokes. Outlines became ever less defined, as if perceived in a haze, and this general diffusion of form further reverberated Bonnard's coloristic high pitch, transforming the domestic world he had been depicting for decades into a full-blown oneiric space.

▲ Léger's postwar work, by contrast, constitutes a retreat. While he was in America during the war, Léger had explored the possibility of an isotropic pictorial space with his series of *Divers* and *Acrobats*: jumping from all sides, their floating figures move in defiance of gravity. Theoretically, these canvases could be hung in four different positions—this was Léger's hypothetical claim at least, although he undermined it by applying a sole signature in one elected corner. Léger's many versions of his *Divers* and *Acrobats* all convey a sense of directionlessness akin to that of Joan Miró's *Constellations* of 1940 to 1941, and although this debt is rarely acknowledged, the 1944 exhibition of Léger's works in New York might have played no less significant a role in the elaboration of Pollock's concept of the allover than Miró's 1945 show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery. However, while Miró retained this resolutely open-ended sense of indirection in his art for years to come, Léger opted for the heroic-monumental genre. Even though he had been one of the few modernist painters to think seriously, as early as the mid-twenties, about what would much later be coined (by Clement Greenberg) the "crisis of the easel painting," even though he had clearly stated that this medium as such was doomed to wither and that the survival of painting was predicated upon its ability to fuse with other media (including architecture) and develop a new sense of scale, he was himself bound by his ideological allegiance. Léger joined the Communist Party shortly after Picasso, but while the Spanish painter fluctuated between cynical endorsement of Stalinist politics through minor propaganda work (for example, his assembly-line production of dove "peace" designs) and utter indifference to the Party line, Léger believed in the credo and wished to "educate the masses" through his art. As a result, his postwar art, while still having recourse to all the stylistic devices he had developed since the early thirties (thick contours enclosing the figures; schematic modeling by degradation of black superimposed on flat planes of pure colors), becomes increasingly stiff. His figures end up mimicking, without the harsh rudeness and convincing naivety ■ one finds in the work of an Aleksandr Deineka, for example, the postures found in Soviet "Socialist Realist" painting. Unlike that of Matisse, Picasso, Braque, or Bonnard, Léger's art did not grow in the postwar Reconstruction period—which nevertheless did not prevent him from being a force with which the coming generation had to reckon.



6 • Pierre Bonnard, *Studio with Mimosas*, 1939–46

Oil on canvas, 126 × 126 (49½ × 49½)



7 • Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life*, c. 1946

Oil on canvas, 28.7 × 39.4 (11½ × 15½)

A new generation comes into its own

Léger was passed over by the Venice Biennale. Having celebrated several figurative Old Masters of the School of Paris, the Biennale moved to Surrealism, another movement that had been deliberately ignored during the Fascist years (in 1954 Max Ernst received ▲ the Grand Prize for painting, and Hans Arp for sculpture), then, finally, it moved to the new generation—which meant at that time, for this old institution not particularly attuned to the most recent developments in art, postwar abstraction (Mark Tobey [1890–1976] and Eduardo Chillida [1924–2002] in 1958, Hans ● Hartung [1904–1989] and Jean Fautrier [1898–1964] in 1960).

But the attribution of Grand Prizes to international masters was not sufficient as a means for the Biennale to attend to its political campaign of redemptive amnesia: it also needed to address the troubled Italian context. The most daring move was its celebration ▲ in 1950 of “The Signers of the First Futurist Manifesto”: in what amounted to a total travesty of history, it entirely omitted Marinetti, who as the uncontested leader of Futurism, had not only written the said manifesto but had also been the most famous official “bard” of Mussolini’s regime. That his reluctant colleagues had not been reluctant enough—and had basically gone along with Marinetti’s antics—was in no way addressed.

Not all of the Biennale’s revisionist attempts were as ill-conceived or hypocritical. In 1948, two years before it tried to absolve Futurism of its past political crimes, it paid homage to *pittura metafisica* in a • group show featuring Carlo Carrà, Giorgio de Chirico, and Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964). The exhibition failed to convince many critics that de Chirico’s late work was anything but a total renunciation of his early stance (which had been so important for the birth of Surrealism), and Carrà’s dimly lit star did not get any brighter either, but Morandi, a secluded man, until then barely known outside Italy, was suddenly put on the map. This outburst of recognition did not change anything for him—neither in his art, whose very strict parameters had been established since the early twenties, nor in his monastic life. For years until he died, Morandi painted similar compositions: mainly small still-life arrangements of several empty vessels (bottles, glass, cups, vases) seen slightly from above and disposed frontally on a barren plane (the table is never more than a horizon line) and against a no-less-barren wall [7]; the whole always in tonal color schemes (he became of master of gray) and in sharp light (either zenithal and thus without shadows, or oblique, with accentuated shadows reminiscent of de Chirico’s first manner). Morandi’s art is one of reticence, of whisper—it is at odds with the buoyant claims of the many avant-garde movements that succeeded one another at growing pace during the twentieth-century. Like ■ Ad Reinhardt in his abstract “black,” “ultimate” paintings, Morandi opted for what one would be tempted to call a minor mode—if this term did not necessarily carry negative connotations—a mode in which pathos and the agonistic rhetoric of high contrasts are abolished and where the work requires a long contemplation before it can begin to take hold. Unsurprisingly, beholders were slow to grasp Morandi’s quiet stance—but, in the end, the hermit of Bologna did more to convince younger artists that the game of painting was still worth playing than did Picasso in his postwar grandstanding. YAB

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Art at mid-century

HF: First, let's address a few of the important narratives of prewar art that emerge in the postwar period, and clarify our historical differences from them. Second, we might take up the problem of antimodernism, and why this was long a difficult topic to discuss adequately. And third, we should grapple with the question of World War II as a caesura, and how different histories of twentieth-century art negotiate this break, either marking it as definitive, denying it in the interest of continuity, or bridging it in the name of reconstruction. No doubt we will stray from this itinerary—but let's begin with the account of prewar modernism developed by

▲ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the first director of the Museum of Modern Art.

YAB: One thing that strikes us now is the difference between Barr's enthusiastic encounter with the Russian avant-garde on his trip to the Soviet Union in 1927–8 and the way Russian Constructivism was later melted down at MoMA to a production of abstract paintings and sculptures. Even if Barr was specifically searching for painters and sculptors on his visit ("I must find more painters," he noted in his diary after a visit to Rodchenko, who told him he had stopped painting in 1922), he was impressed by all the work done by Constructivist artists in what we could call the realm of • propaganda or the "ideological front" (theater design, film sets, typography, exhibition design, etc.). Even if he was critical of the antiart concept of "factography" in the end, he spent a considerable amount of time with its theoretician, the writer Sergei Tretyakov, trying to understand it. Barr admired the "brilliant" Konstantin ■ Umansky, who "at the age of 19" had written the book *Neue Kunst in Russland* (it long remained the only synthetic study of Soviet art), and he was particularly struck by Umansky's comment that "a proletarian style was emerging from the wall newspaper with its combined text, poster, and photomontage": "an interesting and acute suggestion," Barr noted. In short, he was extremely curious about the transformations made in the aesthetic realm by the Soviet avant-garde, trying to gauge their consequences for the future. But then he seems to have "forgotten" all this almost as soon as he left Russia: he couldn't take it into consideration in the history of modern art he was constructing.

HF: Yet there are residues of his encounter with art in relation to industrial production in his interest in *design*, though that interest was ♦ mostly read through the Bauhaus, which Barr also visited—that is,

through a more capitalist-friendly version of art into production.... When does he do his flowchart of modernist movements?

BB: 1936.

HF: Right, for his "Cubism and Abstract Art" show of that year.

YAB: And his Bauhaus show comes soon after, in 1938.

BB: I wouldn't dismiss his interest in the Bauhaus simply as the capitalist version of the art-into-production project. I think it indicates a more complex comprehension of the transformation of avant-garde practices in the twenties toward production, architecture, and design, and utilitarian definitions of art in general that are very significant for Barr's position. And it is accompanied ▲ by an equally strong interest in the legacy of Dada, which was another set of operations that opened up the traditional model of art in a radical way. All of these positions are present in his 1936 account. The question is: How do these extraordinary historical chapters get edited out in the reception of MoMA's exhibitions and in the work of the first generation of American artists and critics after Barr?

HF: Of course there are other chapters, other movements, in his chart, yet they are also streamlined: they are all made to flow into successors according to a historicist model of consecutive influence and formal progress, and this sets up

• the further editing of modernism that occurs down the line with Clement Greenberg and others. Granted, it is a pedagogical chart, an introductory one, and the lines are more complicated, not to say convoluted, than we usually recall ...

RK: Yet Barr does present a basic kind of bifurcation into, on the one hand, mechanist models of form and, on the other, organicist models. And he emphasizes the organicist because he feels that

■ the most important phenomenon at the time is Surrealism. He wants to welcome Surrealism into the family of modernist forms.

HF: But those impulses are still formalized into "geometrical" and "nongeometrical" abstraction. True, the mechanist is a force in the geometrical lineage, but it is removed from industrial production, indeed from social, economic, and political context altogether. Similarly, the organicist is a dimension of the nongeometrical lineage, but it is detached from the body and

the drives, from all psychoanalytic associations. Barr has these terms in play, but in a formal sense only.

BB: The teleology of his view of modernist art would also have to be associated with the overall teleology of American liberal democracy in which the actual integration of artistic practices into the sphere of everyday life is not at issue. What is at issue is their institutional containment, not their practical deployment and realization—neither the politics of Dada and Surrealism nor the politics of
▲ Constructivism and Productivism.

HF: This also speaks to the unique situation in the United States in which the initial encounter with the avant-garde is quickly followed by its partial institutionalization. There is the Armory Show in 1913, of course—the legendary shock of the first encounter—the Alfred
● Stieglitz circle in the teens, the New York Dada salons, and several gallery shows—but then there follows the Museum of Modern Art in 1929, “Art of This Century” in 1942, and so on, in which the reception of modernism all but occurs within the setting of the museum.

YAB: And the reception of the avant-garde in these museums, until very late, was only in regard to Europe. That was the complaint of many American artists: “They show the most advanced European art, and they don’t even look at us.” For the museums the source had to be from far away; it had to be Europe: that was the land, grand and strange, where these bizarre new objects were produced, and their foreignness is what allowed American museums to present them favorably and give them form institutionally. It’s a new kind of exoticism, in a way.

HF: So what happens to Surrealism in this story, if it’s so important to the first generation of abstract artists in the United States? It is very present in the form of exiled artists in New York during the war. We should talk a little about how it gets assimilated or occluded.

■ **RK:** In 1940 Clement Greenberg writes “Towards a Newer Laocoön” in which he attacks Surrealism, among other things, for being narrative, and Lessing’s *Laocoön* becomes a kind of master model (though it was published in 1766!) of how to separate the visual and spatial arts from the verbal and temporal arts in modernism. For Greenberg the literary is temporal, Surrealism is literary, and so it must be condemned as impure.

HF: It is improper to visual art, and so not a modernist art, in his sense, at all. I never quite understood how “Towards a Newer Laocoön” could follow so closely on his “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” essay (1939), with its framing of the avant-garde still in terms of a social struggle in a historical field. In one year he seems to go from an almost dialectical account of the avant-garde to a rather static analysis of the decorum of the arts.

BB: The story of the elision of Surrealism in early accounts of Abstract Expressionism is more complicated than the resistance of Greenberg alone. Take the rejection of Surrealism by Barnett
◆ Newman: it’s clearly a process of a programmatic disidentification after an initial embrace. The embrace had to do with the radicality of automatist procedures of mark-making and even, possibly, with

psychoanalytic models of the unconscious. Then, in the transition from the moment of Surrealist reception to the moment of the

▲ constitution of an Abstract Expressionist identity, Surrealism had to be rejected. This rejection was not a rejection of psychoanalysis—

YAB: —on the part of Newman it was.

BB: Nor did it mean the rejection of automatism. It was driven by a need to redefine aesthetic identity within the parameters of a new historical moment, and that entailed, for Newman too, a realization that the Surrealist indulgence in the unconscious was no longer valid after the trauma of World War II and the Holocaust.

That is one rift, a major chasm, whether explicitly or only latently expressed. Another is the realization that this historical situation needed redefinition, not only in geopolitical terms or in terms of a new national identity, but also in terms that were specifically *tragic*. That’s why Serge Guilbaut’s account of the ideological functions of Abstract Expressionism and T. J. Clark’s view of it as an art of middle-class vulgarity don’t work for me: they don’t understand the radicality of the point of departure of those artists.¹ There was a sense of loss, of destruction, of utter inaccessibility to prewar

● culture that rivals Theodor Adorno’s in its decisiveness—though, of course, it couldn’t be articulated in his terms at the time. The fundamental difference between the postwar aesthetics of Adorno and of Greenberg might be defined as follows. On the one hand, Adorno was a Marxist philosopher and an avant-garde composer-musician formed in the most differentiated culture of the European bourgeoisie who witnessed the actual destruction by the Nazis not only of his own context but of European bourgeois culture at large. On the other hand, Greenberg was a member of a New York

■ Trotskyite circle around the journal *Partisan Review*, which was then aspiring to lay the foundation of a new democratic culture in the United States; the historical condition of the Holocaust and World War I could not be easily integrated into his progressivist model of the future.

YAB: Paradoxically, the difference between European and American perspectives was deepened by the presence of many Surrealists in New York—André Breton above all, but also Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, André Masson, Roberto Matta, Kurt Seligmann, Yves Tanguy, among others. Suddenly people who had been constructed at the level of myth were just *there*, and they didn’t correspond to the legends. Some of them were living comfortable lives (Ernst was married to Peggy Guggenheim), and had a steady market. One shouldn’t underestimate the shock of young admirers,
◆ such as Jackson Pollock and Arshile Gorky, who had worked in the Works Progress Administration, on seeing how little their heroes resembled *artistes maudits* or *enfants terribles*.

HF: Of course, the sense of the tragic and the traumatic could not be the basis of an affirmative story of modernism, a story of renewed continuity of the sort that Greenberg and others wanted to tell, and that institutions in this period of reconstruction needed to be told. So that dimension had to be occluded. The same goes for aspects of modernism contaminated by fascism—like late Futurism—or, especially in the McCarthy period, implicated

▲ 1916a, 1920, 1921b, 1924, 1925c, 1928a, 1928b, 1930b, 1931a ● 1916b, 1942b ■ 1960b ◆ 1951

▲ 1947b ● Introduction 2 ■ 1942a ◆ 1936, 1942a, 1949a, 1960b

in Communism. Hence, in part, the blind eye turned to most

▲ Russian Constructivism and some German Dada.

BB: Absolutely.

YAB: There is one mantra that Newman repeats in his early essays: "After the monstrosity of the war, what do we do? What is there to paint? We have to start all over again." You never find this discourse in Greenberg—as if the trauma didn't exist.

HF: This might be too speculative, but I wonder if it reappears in displaced form in the discourse about Abstract Expressionism, with a traumatic sense of the war and the Holocaust sublimated and subjectivized in the reception of such work in terms of the Sublime. The experience of "the abyss" or "the void" in a Pollock, a Newman, a Rothko, or a Gottlieb might register this kind of historical sublime, but writ small—in fact small enough so that the viewer can feel the traumatic frisson but also recoup it, even be empowered by it, along the lines of the Sublime as classically understood by Kant or Burke. Perhaps there is a trace of this recouping in the response that the viewer of the late-modernist work is supposed to have: the epiphanic bolt of insight, the sudden sense of transcendence, what Michael Fried later famously called "grace."

RK: Shedding the dross of one's own body becomes the figure of transcending—

HF: —the historical in general—

RK: —and the physical as well.

BB: And recent history in particular. That was one of the precarious questions being asked by intellectuals in the forties around *Partisan Review*: "Are you confronting the Holocaust? Are you making it the key topic of every moment of your daily thinking? Or are you turning away from it in order to make a new culture?" If you read *Partisan Review* from that time it is amazing how the two positions appear side by side from issue to issue: Hannah Arendt in 1946 speaking about the concentration camps, for example, and Clement Greenberg two years later speaking about the rise of a pure modernism. Either you confront that history or you don't. And if you don't, it's easier to claim access to a new identity-formation in relation to American liberal-democratic culture: that lies at the foundation of the new painting in New York as well, and it's one of the bases of American formalism as well. I'm not polemicizing; I'm trying to describe the etiology of that compulsion to purify, to disidentify with that historical body.

YAB: There were several attempts from the early fifties to the mid-sixties to speak about Jewishness, art, and their relationship to the trauma of the Holocaust, but every time the issue is raised it is hushed up: people don't want to hear about it. Two of the critics at issue here write seriously about this—Greenberg in "Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism: Some Reflections on 'Positive Jewishness'" (in *Commentary* in November 1950) and Harold Rosenberg in "Is There a Jewish Art?" (in the same magazine in July 1966)—but only once each, I believe, and mostly to explain

the silence. They try to theorize the post-traumatic silence with regard to the Holocaust on the part of artists.

HF: The early sixties is also the moment when New York intellectuals break apart over "the banality of evil" thesis developed by Arendt in her *New Yorker* coverage of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. (I've always wondered about the connection to another

▲ provocative "banality" at this time, that of Pop art, and the outraged response to its emergence by some of the same intellectuals—as if Pop also threatened the value of profundity, or whatever the opposite of banality is, in culture, morality, and politics.) After *Eichmann in Jerusalem* the traumatic silence gives way to a torrent of enraged speech. But, to return to that silence for a moment, one can imagine how oppressive it was for artists and writers to be asked, all but compelled, to think about the tragic and the traumatic in this way. One can understand the impulse to turn away, to begin again—even though that impulse is oppressive in its own way too, of course.

● **BB:** The figure of Meyer Schapiro should be brought into the conversation in this regard. There's another dimension here—Hal ■ just alluded to it—it's the dismantling of the Left. This is also the moment—to return to the comment about the shift in Greenberg from "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in 1939 to "Towards a Newer Laocoön" in 1940—when the Marxist tradition is all but liquidated, sometimes auto-liquidated, self-exorcised.

HF: What's the famous line in Greenberg looking back on the thirties from the early fifties? "Some day it will have to be told how 'anti-Stalinism,' which started out more or less as 'Trotskyism,' turned into 'art for art's sake,' and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come."

RK: "Eliotic Trotskyism," T. J. Clark called it once.

YAB: The first traumatic event for the American Left was, of course, the Moscow show trials in 1936. And the Hitler–Stalin pact in 1939 was the last straw.

HF: Right. And Greenberg can't believe that some artists stick to the Party line. He later says of Pollock: "He was a damned Stalinist from start to finish." However misguided that position might have been, it also points to some resistance, political not only aesthetic, to Greenberg's reading of their art.

YAB: We have discussed what American artists faced immediately after the war, but not what French artists did. What was their situation? How different was it? There was the same trauma ...

BB: There was more: after all it was European culture that had been ruined in the war, and a central European nation state whose fascist takeover had wrought that destruction—a nation state that, like its ally Italy, had once represented the highest achievements of European humanism.

◆ **YAB:** The case of Jean Fautrier, an artist who was always suppressed in the States, is interesting in this regard. No one paid attention when he exhibited in New York in 1952, '56, and '57

(the last of these shows at Sidney Janis's), even though he was an abstract artist—not even Greenberg. But he has become more prominent lately, perhaps in part because we now recognize that he was one of the first avant-garde artists to take into account the trauma of the war and the Holocaust. It started during the war with his "Otages" paintings, but their exhibition in Paris in the immediate postwar moment was a great bomb. His attempt was immediately transformed by Jean Dubuffet, and also taken in a different direction ▲ by Lucio Fontana, so the "repression" of his work is not only an American phenomenon—it just took a different form in Europe, that of sanitization. It's always puzzled me that Fautrier's attempt to take the trauma into consideration disappeared so quickly.

BB: There is an even more deliberate desire to disavow the trauma, at least on the part of the next generation. If you look at Fontana, Piero Manzoni, and especially Yves Klein, you see the most important efforts in art to define European reconstruction culture. Perhaps paradoxically, the link—and it is particularly important for Fontana and Klein—that connects all these practices is spectacularization. At that moment two major theoreticians of postwar European aesthetics emerge: one is Adorno, and the ● other is Guy Debord. They represent the polarity through which an aesthetics of traumatization and the impossibility of renewing modernist continuity is articulated. That polarity reflects on the legacy of the Holocaust on the one hand and, on the other, on the apparatus of spectacle that will inevitably take over even the last remnants of opposition and exemption, resistance and subversion, that the avant-garde had previously claimed for itself. And that's where Fontana and Klein position themselves from the very beginning, even more so than Pollock—within the registers of spectacle culture.

HF: Some previous practices speak to both necessities. For example, the primordial and the primitive, the child and the insane, are old modernist interests, to be sure, but they return with special ■ force in the immediate postwar period with *art brut* and *Cobra*. Perhaps they provided a way at once to register the trauma of the Holocaust and to disavow it. To seek radical beginnings registers the horror of the past, but it is also an escapist flight from recent history—perhaps the Abstract Expressionist motto of "the First Man" functioned in a similar way.

BB: To dehistoricize the trauma. Also in play here is the sudden interest in sites like Lascaux: prehistoric caves in lieu of contemporary camps.

HF: Yes. But also evident there is an attempt to counter, perhaps even to recover, a primordialism that the Nazis had contaminated. It's not simply an either/or: either represent or disavow the trauma. There are aesthetic constructs that are almost compromise-formations—that acknowledge historical reality but in a bracketed, abstracted, or otherwise dehistoricized way. Again, the point is to describe these moves, to understand them, not to pathologize them.

BB: In addition to the first two complexes—namely, the trauma of World War II and the Holocaust and the destruction of the

American Left and Left culture at large—a third question confronts the New York School in its formative stages: how does the mass-cultural sphere reemerge, and how should the avant-garde relate to that sphere? After all, that had been one of the central questions of the twenties that had affected the constitution of all avant-garde practices. Paradoxically, in the postwar moment, as the mass-cultural sphere in its American version reemerges with even greater power than in the twenties, the avant-garde withdraws into a mode of total denial of its existence: it adopts a completely entrenched, hermetic model of modernist refusal. It takes at least ten years, ▲ with the rise of Jasper Johns and proto-Pop art, before the mass-cultural sphere reenters artistic awareness explicitly.

● **HF:** There is also the Independent Group in Britain slightly earlier. But, yes, before then, there is this talk of "we unhappy few" against the world. And yet at the same time Pollock appears in—

YAB: *Vogue*.

HF: Yes, in 1951 his drip paintings are used as backdrops to fashion pictures by Cecil Beaton, but also, earlier, in *Life*, in the famous article that serves as the heading for our "1949" Pollock ■ entry: "Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?"

BB: That's not a confrontation; that's an erosion, and an indication that the isolation is delusory, or that the claim to it is delusory.

HF: Yes. Modernist refusal gets "mediated" at that point, literally: it begins to be circulated on a mass level as a bohemian pose. The Situationists see this problem clearly by the late fifties.

BB: And the disavowal of psychoanalysis—

YAB: —occurs at the same time that it's taken up in Hollywood.

HF: Dalí doing the dream-sequence sets for Hitchcock's *Spellbound* in 1945.

BB: More important is that it's being institutionalized at a mass level in the United States. That's when psychoanalysis is raised to its highest level of everyday, pragmatic practice.

HF: But it's only a particular version of psychoanalysis—ego ● psychology—that gets taken up, and which Jacques Lacan, a young associate of the Surrealists (of Dalí's in fact!), always railed against.

YAB: Its Jungian version also gets taken up, earlier even with Pollock. It all becomes a common kind of do-it-yourself psychotherapy around that time.

HF: So again it's not a case of outright repression. One can understand why these discourses are shirked: their terms get corrupted, their appropriation renders them invalid.

YAB: They become consumables: you consume this or that brand of psychoanalysis the same way you consume this or that fridge.

BB: As Walter Benjamin said, "Neurosis is the equivalent of the commodity on the psychic level."

RK: Can we understand the success of Greenberg's story, then, partly in relation to a collective need to repress this tragic or traumatic past? His brief for abstract painting succeeds in that partial repression, and therefore that painting performs a kind of social function.

HF: There is that connection, but we have to make it more indirectly. In a sense what we see as a process of repression they saw as a process of conservation. On the one hand, abstract painting is one of the great avant-garde ruptures; on the other hand, it is also, as "modernist painting," committed to the centrality of painting and the maintenance of its traditions. It serves to bracket or to suspend other avant-garde breaks, to keep other avant-garde paradigms to one side, at least in the States—I mean ▲ the paradigms that the German critic Peter Bürger,² the author of the third narrative that we want to discuss here, underscores: readymades and constructed sculptures, collages and photomontages. Historical memory is displaced and concentrated onto the memory of one medium, advanced painting, which then provides the basis for a historical continuity that cannot be maintained otherwise—not in art and not in history in general. There is also a displacement of political revolution onto formal innovation. That's implicit in the Greenberg remark I cited about looking back on the thirties from the fifties. Fried also states as much in a retrospective passage in "Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella" in 1965.³

YAB: What is also striking is that Greenberg never takes into consideration the political claims of the artists themselves. For ● example, Mondrian saw his work as a blueprint for a future socialist society—hard to believe though this might seem. In a manuscript that appeared only posthumously, *The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships*, he directly appropriated a passage from a political pamphlet by his friend the anarcho-syndicalist militant Arthur Lehning. Lehning was, among other things, the editor of an extraordinary journal called *1:10* that appeared in 1927–8, which, besides offering the first serious analysis of the Stalinization of the Soviet Union, published texts not only by Mondrian, Kurt Schwitters, and László Moholy-Nagy but also Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Alexander Berkman (an old ally of Emma Goldman). It is this type of information, this kind of link, that is obliterated in Greenberg's view of modernism. ■ The same thing happens with his treatment of Newman. Newman recognized the role Greenberg played in his sudden rise to fame in the late fifties, but he still disliked the critic's interpretation of his work because it failed to address its anarchistic implications. I'm not saying that Mondrian and Newman were right about their own painting, only that Greenberg was oblivious to these aspects of it.

HF: At the same time he was far and away the best contemporary critic of their aesthetic ambitions.

BB: Greenberg does address those ambitions, in their continuity with past painting too, but as far as Newman is concerned this continuity also had to be ruptured. For him it's not Newman and Mondrian; it's Newman versus Mondrian. Newman claims a radical

break with Mondrian: both his pictorial concepts and his utopian visions are invalidated, no longer possible.

HF: According to Newman.

BB: According to Greenberg too.

YAB: But not for the same reasons. It took Newman a long time to see why he was so different from Mondrian. Until the mid-sixties he repeated all the clichés of the Mondrian literature—that his work was not really abstract but grounded in nature, or that it was

▲ decorative design, etc. His young Minimalist admirers (Donald Judd in particular) provided him with a new critical vocabulary (that's when he begins to speak in terms of the "wholeness" or his paintings as opposed to the "part-to-part" aesthetic of Mondrian), but in the end he coins his criticism of Mondrian in political terms: the Dutch painter was not an anarchist, though he might sometimes have felt he was—he was too Hegelian, too totalistic in his ideas not only about painting but also about the state. Newman, who had always professed anarchistic positions (he prefaced the memoirs of Kropotkin) felt that Mondrian's utopianism was the exact opposite of his stance. Greenberg never addresses that: he never says that Mondrian's and Newman's suggest two totally different world views.

HF: But other artists of the time did not claim such a definitive caesura. Or if they did so, it was out of an Oedipal struggle—especially with Picasso, of course—in which a break at one level is staged in order to forge a connection at another level, a kind of trumping that is both psychological and stylistic. Political differences were usually overwhelmed by such aesthetic positioning.

YAB: Pollock's involved there.

● **HF:** And Gorky, de Kooning, and others. So the story of continuity, troubled or not, opportunistic or not, makes some sense. Again, it also makes great sense institutionally: the postwar period saw enormous growth in museums and universities, and there was a powerful demand for a narrative of recovery and reclamation. The Greenbergian version in particular is also a story, a technique, that could be reproduced, and it was, extensively—it was a great discursive success, curatorially and pedagogically. In a way its success parallels that of the modern discipline of art history when its German founders like Erwin Panofsky flee Hitler for Britain and the States: it, too, gets streamlined and simplified into a technique—primarily that of iconography—which is then circulated and passed down to subsequent generations.

BB: I would twist that, and say again that this narrative of modernism also has the specific *telos* of postwar American liberal democracy. It wants to implement, in response to the catastrophe of the bourgeois nation states of Europe, a different kind of access to education, a different kind of egalitarianism in aesthetic experience. I would not reduce it all to reconstruction ideology; I think there is a more complicated *telos*, with other political implications, in the institutionalization of the discourse of modernism. That, too, is part of avant-garde culture in New York

at the time, and certainly part of Greenberg's project as well. And, as you say, though his omissions are disastrous, he deals with the artists that he selects, American and European, more profoundly and more precisely than anyone else does. He is the one who, in a sense, redeems the modernist legacy for postwar memory.

YAB: It becomes clear now how he was able to do so. Greenberg pretended to a kind of ideological neutrality; this allowed him to make his positivist turn of seeming simply to describe the art. And this turn freed him from the pathos of existentialist critics like Rosenberg. Everything was discarded: an ex-Marxist, Greenberg could present himself as objective—as objective as an engineer or a scientist. So he became the pure empiricist who only describes. And he did it perfectly well ...

HF: Let's move on to a third important model of prewar art, the one proposed by Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger makes two opposed claims: on the one hand, that a modernist autonomy of art was achieved in the late nineteenth century (earlier than in the Greenbergian narrative), and, on the other hand, that this aesthetic autonomy was attacked by "the historical avant-gardes" in the early twentieth century, both in forms of art (for example, the Dadaist assault on painting and sculpture) and in institutions of art (for example, the Futurist assault on the museums). Bürger goes on to construct a story about the tragic failure of this avant-garde and its farcical repetition in the postwar period, a project he dismisses as a "neo-avant-garde," as a recuperation of the historical critique of autonomous art as a new form of art.

BB: There are two things to add immediately: Bürger is a German literary historian, and he published that book in 1974. Even for this relatively early date it is very schematic; and yet, as you said before, he does realert us to those legacies that American formalists like Greenberg and Fried as well as European writers in their wake had disallowed or disavowed—Dada culture in all of its forms, Surrealism, Russian Constructivism and Soviet Productivism. Bürger was not the only one to do this; he wrote in a post-1968 moment that brought all of those practices back into view. In a sense he sums up this work.

HF: And as you pointed out once, he obscures one of his own conditions of possibility—contemporary artists like Marcel Broodthaers and Hans Haacke, who commented not only on the historical avant-garde but also on the neo-avant-garde—on the limits of this neo-avant-garde as well, the very limits that Bürger castigates so strongly.

BB: Yes, he concludes a process that was in the works for ten years or so in both scholarly and artistic practice.

YAB: And in exhibitions too.

BB: Bürger also failed to understand how those historical avant-garde models had differed tremendously from one another; this point was discussed extensively by his critics, at least in Germany when his text was first published. Of course these differences were

both theoretical and political. For example, while Freudo-Marxism was constitutive of Surrealism, Dadaism had departed from rather different theoretical positions, ranging from mysticism to the beginnings of structural linguistics to Leninism in Berlin Dada. There was also an anarchistic, even nihilistic quality in Dadaism, which was not at all present in Russian Constructivism, let alone in Soviet Productivism. And while a reorientation toward collectivity was foundational to the Russian and Soviet avant-garde, it was

▲ not the kind of collectivity that De Stijl proposed in Holland.

And so on. One should challenge Bürger's model on these points, and ask what exact features of the various avant-garde models he was bringing back into view at that time. One aspect that was not brought back by Bürger is the way that the bourgeois public sphere was not only contested by the historical avant-garde but also eroded and/or displaced by the rise of mass-cultural spheres—in Weimar Germany, in Italy both prior and during Fascism, and then under the totalitarian regimes of Germany and the Soviet Union.

HF: As important as the Bürger text is, it is schematic not only about the different avant-gardes, but also in its opposition of "the institution of art" and "life practice," of "art" and "reality." To begin with, the institution of art is radically different in different countries, and sometimes in different cities—think of the diverse contexts of Dada alone around World War I: Zurich, a neutral but tempestuous site; Berlin, in political revolt; Cologne, occupied; Hanover, an enclave; Paris, vectored by different political forces, artistic movements, antimodernist sentiments; New York, distant from these troubles, a scene of salon and exhibition scandals more than anything else.

YAB: What is also strange is that Bürger never alludes to the invention of the art market at the time of the historical avant-garde or to its enormous growth at the time of the neo-avant-garde.

- The auction consortium "Peau de l'Ours" was the first time that modern art made a profit, and this had an enormous impact. And yet it's as though the market doesn't exist for Bürger. In Germany too the art market was already very developed before WWI, with Herwarth Walden's der Sturm and other galleries ...

HF: That's in part what I mean: the opposition of "autonomous art" and "life practice," if it can be posited historically at all, is already breaking down at the time of the historical avant-garde because of economic forces.

YAB: Yes. In a funny way Bürger treats the problem of the avant-garde in a historical vacuum.

BB: This oversight is especially surprising coming from a member of the 1968 generation for whom the problem of art's rapidly increasing commodification had become such a key question.

HF: What about a related question—the "mediation" of the historical avant-garde, the fact that it sometimes emerged in the very space of mass-media forms like the newspaper?

- One example is given in our "1909" entry on Futurism: Marinetti publishes "The First Manifesto of Futurism" in *Le Figaro*. Another

▲ occurs in 1925 in the context of the “Arts décoratifs” exhibition at the World Fair in Paris

YAB: Yes: the transformation of the avant-garde into design, into luxury goods—Cubism turned into Art Deco tables.

HF: It happens fast—in that case in ten years or so—and it happens again and again.

YAB: And it completely saturates the perception of what modernism is. Here it's fascinating to look at Italy under Fascism where you have luxurious villas for Fascist leaders decorated with Cubist paintings, Eileen Gray tables, and so on.

HF: That too is not part of the Bürger account—or any other familiar one, for that matter. Also, on the one side his opposition of institution of art and life practice tends to occlude the various projects to *transform* the institution of art or to construct a new one altogether, as in the Russian Constructivist attempt to found different kinds of schools, different modes of making and exhibiting, production and distribution, to make a proletarian cultural or indeed public sphere. On the other side Bürger seems very romantic about life practice. This is a criticism that Jürgen Habermas makes too: What does it mean to break apart the putative autonomy of art under conditions of mass media and culture?

BB: As of the present day we know: it means the regime of total desublimation.

YAB: A good test case is the “Congress of International Progressive Artists” held in Düsseldorf in May 1922—that gives us a range of positions. The one that ends up as the most Leftist, most avant-gardist, is made up of such different figures as Hans Richter, El Lissitzky, and Theo van Doesburg—a German Dadaist, a Russian artist connected to both Suprematism and Constructivism, ■ and the Dutch head of De Stijl. They protest that the others in the Congress don't have a definition of what a new and progressive art is: “All you want to do,” they say, “is to federate your movements so as to build up an art market.” There's an amazingly clear analysis of the avant-garde, especially from Lissitzky, in its own historical moment: a recognition of its imminent failure and dispersal if the project is not carried beyond what I would call a “guild” mode.

HF: Isn't there, hidden in your example, another side of this failure, another side of the condition of mass media and culture, which is to say the possibility, for the first time, of a real internationalism of the avant-garde? And isn't there also a utopian dimension there, not only in individual projects but in the collective coming-together of such diverse figures at events like the Congress, which was not immediately commodified then and should not be forgotten now? How can we restore those dimensions to that moment of international meetings, exhibitions, manifestos, and so on? There were enormous hopes for modernism. We might see it now as just another ruse of history, but it wasn't all delusion.

BB: It depended on the programmatic theorization of what a real culture of the proletarian public sphere might become at the time,

and the Congress addressed the possibilities of its realization. One necessary condition for artistic practice was to live up to the aspirations of post-nation-state identities—identities that are not only defined by proletarian class and collectivity but also understood in terms of a subjectivity that could be constructed outside the parameters of the nation state. That's the reason why internationalism at that moment could be political and proletarian as well as aesthetic and avant-garde.

HF: One might have thought that World War I would have dashed the hope of such internationalism, as even most socialist parties submitted to nationalist imperatives, but it didn't: internationalism revived, and thrived, in the twenties. And in part it did so on account of the war, in reaction against it.

YAB: The case of Berlin in the early twenties is relevant here, especially after the end of the blockade isolating Russia, which was immediately followed by the arrival of many Russian artists and writers of all persuasions (not that many belonged to the old guard linked to the Czarist regime, as these tended to go to Paris). Members of the Hungarian avant-garde also came to Berlin fleeing the military coup that had ended a Soviet-like republic after just a few months in 1919. So in those years Berlin became a kind of platform of internationalism. The German intellectuals (and Berlin Dada in particular) were the most forceful: “We don't want to be caught in that horrible nationalistic butchery again.” There was also still the hope, on the part of Russian pro-Soviet artists and writers (such as Lissitzky, who arrived in Germany in 1922), that they could export new means for the production and reception of art and culture. In fact one of the things that Bürger does not discuss is the will, on the part of many avant-garde practitioners in the late teens and twenties, to produce new kinds of distribution for their art—all their journals, for example, are also “art projects” in a way. The proliferation of those little magazines is very different from the immersion in mass media of Futurism, with Marinetti publishing his manifesto in *Le Figaro*. On the other hand, one might argue that, because those journals were not mass-produced, there was already a sort of retrenchment—but that was due to a lack of means as much as anything else.

HF: There's another possibility here, though one very dependent on particular political conditions, and that is the example of John Heartfield, who published some of his most critical photomontages as covers of mass worker magazines like the illustrated weekly

▲ *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* with circulations in the hundreds of thousands. But you're right: there is a real divide between the micro media of the journal and the mass media of the newspaper; there are some attempts, however, to cut across the gap, and not to be satisfied with either side.

BB: Marinetti simply accepted the given media apparatus as an institution that could not be contested. That is what happens again in a later moment, closer to our own time. But there is an interim moment when other distribution forms are conceived and alternative public spheres, whether proletarian or simply avant-gardist, are claimed. And sometimes they are acted upon, and

eventually asserted as actually existing—for example, the imaging ▲ of a proletarian public sphere in Heartfield's work—but then the whole space collapses.

YAB: There are also moments of great aberration—like Mayakovsky's books of poems 150,000,000 being printed in editions of five thousand by the Soviet State Publishing House in 1920 (Lenin was furious about that, and severely criticized Lunacharsky, the minister of culture and education, for what he considered a stupid mistake). Or Naum Gabo's "Realist Manifesto"—it was also printed in great numbers because the Soviet authorities thought he was a realist painter!

HF: One thing that Bürger does do is to put into play critical and philosophical texts, mostly from the Frankfurt School, that are roughly of the same period as these modernisms. He has enough historical distance to juxtapose writings about the avant-garde and mass culture by Benjamin and Adorno with actual practices of the artists; in fact one of his important theses is the shared historicity of the concepts at work in such texts and works alike. In this textbook we have attempted similar moves. Frequently these are connections not of causal influence so much as of discursive affinity: epistemological fields that different artists and intellectuals share, often without knowing it.

RK: Like the role of the index in Duchamp or of the uncanny in • Surrealism. That conceptual clarity allows for a kind of critical archaeology of artistic practice.

YAB: And it also allows for phenomena that fall outside the usual histories of modern art to be discussed.

HF: The question I wanted to ask is different: now that we can look back at what we have written about the prewar period, what are our own occlusions? (Our exclusions might be clear enough.) What other kinds of connections have we failed to see in this historical field?

BB: My first statement in this register of self-critique would be that we too, like everyone else in our field, have not managed to address what has emerged as one of the key questions about the century: the apparatus of mass culture in the totalitarian public sphere (that's a contradiction in terms and meant to be). With its annihilating antimodernisms, that apparatus precipitated the great hiatus in avant-garde culture from 1933 to 1945 in Western Europe (in many countries, some voluntarily, some as the victims of occupation). How might it be understood now as an anticipation of the eventual breakdown of the boundaries of avant-garde culture and the mass-cultural public sphere in the postwar period? The boundaries between those spheres were much more porous, damaged, indeed destroyed in the period 1933 to 1945 than we have long assumed, and we believed, also for far too long, that the reconstruction of those boundaries in postwar neo-avant-garde culture could actually hold up. What we see now is that they didn't hold up, that they haven't for a long time.

RK: Can you give me an example?

▲ Introduction 2, 1920 ● 1918, 1924, 1930b, 1931a, 1935, 1942b

HF: Maybe I can. Part of the story of the triumphal renewal of modernist art after the war was its radical separation from unsavory politics: if it was to represent liberal democracy, freedom of expression, and so on, any contamination of this sort had to be corrected. (Obviously this was overdetermined: the presentation ▲ of Abstract Expressionism as the epitome of the liberal spirit, for example, was made in the face of a prior attack from the McCarthyite Right, which associated abstraction with • Communism.) In any case the connections between Futurism and Fascism, say, had to be obscured; or, to choose a case that strikes closer to home for some of us, the connections between Russian Constructivism and Stalinism. Now obviously these are occlusions that have prompted very reactive counterreadings in our own time, almost antimodernist readings—for example, that Constructivism ■ somehow leads to Stalinism; that the Constructivist paragon of the artist as engineer of a new proletarian cult is actually embodied in Stalin. But those arguments are simply reactions against a reaction, and so are doubly reductive, and they don't get at the ways not only that some modernists lined up on the far Right but also that some modernisms were bound up, paradoxically, with antimodern positions—were "reactionary modernisms" in that sense. This imbrication has become historically available now in a way that it wasn't for people who had to purify modernism of any such political taint or tie, either to fascism or to Communism.

YAB: There was a separation of modernism from totalitarianism, but there was also a purification of modernism from the avant-garde, so to speak, from the movements we've discussed—Dada, Constructivism, and so on. The avant-garde became a side dish to the great feast of modernism from Picasso and Matisse through Mondrian to Newman.

BB: But those are your artists!

YAB: Yes, but I also see how they were used to push the avant-garde into an ornamental role in the epic of modernism.

HF: At least we have put some of those stories back into play together: the story of modernism with that of the avant-garde, and both with that of antimodernism—not with adequate depth, to be sure, but at least it is sketched.

YAB: Do we want to discuss here the second argument of Bürger, the failure of the historical avant-garde (he never puts any quotation marks around "failure"). What was this failure exactly? The failure to transform the world? As Hal says, that's a little harsh on the part of Mr. Bürger.

BB: Let alone the failure of the postwar neo-avant-garde.

YAB: It's bizarre from a Marxist critic. What did he expect?

HF: That might be a hangover from 1968 too.

BB: That's right, and he's German.

HF: Well, that explains it all.

BB: It's a traditional German task to give grades to history. The

▲ 1947b, 1949a ● 1909 ■ 1921b

Constructivist side of the historical avant-garde is one part of the story; another part is the Surrealist side, and I want to return to it for a moment. In Surrealism a post-nation-state identity was put forward on the basis of radically emancipatory psychoanalytic models of subject-formation. These contested national identity as violently as a politically class-bound model of subject-formation did in the context of the Soviet avant-garde. It's not clear that Bürger treated that dimension, in his conception of the Surrealist subject, either, or whether William Rubin did, when, as chief curator at the Museum of Modern Art, he mounted his show of Dada and Surrealism in 1968. How did Surrealism come back then? We said that these exhibitions predate Bürger's text, and the Bürger–Rubin axis is an interesting one to consider in that light. Did the reception of Surrealism at that time recover its full historical scope, or did it come back already as a highly confined and fetishized historical construct in the form of particular images and objects?

HF: And another question: how was its model of the unconscious treated? Was it seen, in keeping with the sixties, in affirmative terms, à la Herbert Marcuse or Norman O. Brown, as a liberatory unconscious, an Eros-unconscious, an unconscious, moreover, that unlike in Marcuse and Brown was too often thought of in terms of a body that is private and not collective?

RK: In Rubin's hands Surrealism came back as painting and sculpture, not in terms of photography and texts. Twenty years later, when I did my show of Surrealist photography with Jane Livingston, "L'Amour fou: Surrealism and Photography" (1985), it was a historical and theoretical project, and it developed in resistance to the repression of that part of Surrealist history.

YAB: In reexamining the issue you redefined the way we look at Surrealism, because, as Benjamin said, what Rubin attempted to do—which is strange coming from him—was to rescue Surrealism ...

RK: To rescue it as painting and sculpture. Whereas what interested me was how important photography was, and how Surrealism was disseminated through its magazines ...

YAB: If Rubin had been more open to that, he would have had an easier case to make, because he couldn't find a lot of ammunition in Surrealism for the grand narrative of modernist painting. He had Miró, Masson, Matta

HF: Yes, Surrealism was still seen in Bretonian terms as a story of a liberatory desire with painting conceived as its primary vehicle of expression. What the "L'Amour fou" show did was to move the conversation away from Breton toward Georges Bataille, and from painting to photography, and to see Surrealism more as an attack on form, indeed as the disintegration of the very notion of form-giving mediums, which was pursued further in your exhibition "L'Informe" (1996). A very different understanding of psychoanalysis also emerged here: that the Surrealist unconscious had a dark side, not simply in relation to desire, which is not only liberatory but also bound up with lack, but also in relation to the

drives, drives that can be destructive, even deadly, as with the death drive. Perhaps the sixties reading was inflected by the Marcusean discourse of Eros; by the eighties, things looked different, and this difference speaks to the different politics of the two moments, one marked by revolts of many sorts, the other by despair about Reaganite reaction and AIDS deaths.

BB: Perhaps we should also ask what Rubin's approach to Dada was—for Dada was also included in his exhibition and its catalogue, "Dada, Surrealism, and Their Legacies." Not to belabor the point, but he did the same thing to the Dada legacy that he did to Surrealism: it became a constellation of astonishing objects and assemblages. Dada was not the photomontages of John Heartfield, for example; typically, Heartfield didn't even appear in either the show or the book.

HF: Rubin saw Dada in part through the prism of the objects and assemblages that emerged in the Rauschenberg–Johns moment. There was also the precedent of William Seitz's MoMA show "The Art of Assemblage" (1961), which favored Duchamp, Schwitters, Joseph Cornell, Rauschenberg ...

RK: We have to realize too that Rubin was in constant dialogue with Greenberg, trying to convince him that he, Rubin, was not on the wrong track, and that within Surrealism and even Dada there were worthy modernist practices. He was pleading with Greenberg—

BB: And with Barr too, no?

YAB: I want to add two things to this discussion of Dada and Surrealism. Rubin also made his show in response to a wave of neo-Surrealist work in New York—early Oldenburgs, for example, his soft objects, which Rubin saw in relation to Yves Tanguy, say. That's how Rubin thought—in terms of those kinds of juxtapositions. And he always disagreed with Greenberg on Pop; Rubin supported it. And so if he could justify his interest in this new work by finding historical precedents in Surrealism, well, that was one strategy.

BB: Magritte via Johns, for example.

YAB: Yes. My other point about the rereading of Dada and Surrealism in this period concerns the exhibition mounted by Dawn Ades and David Sylvester in London.

HF: That's ten years later, though—1978.

YAB: Yes, but it was the first time there was a show of material entirely based on journals. It was very intelligently organized in relation to what they thought was the crucial medium of those movements (again, the journals were not mass circulation).

RK: One thing that I discovered as I began to work on "L'Amour fou" is that nobody had read the articles in those magazines, for example in *Minotaure*. There was all this very interesting material, and it wasn't being taken into account.

BB: In light of that legacy we've just discussed, it's all the more astonishing that the reconstitution of an American avant-garde was

so programmatically defined in terms of nation-state identity. Both political internationalism and avant-garde internationalism were totally reversed in the constitution of a New York avant-garde. Its very names are foundational: the New York School, American art, and so on.

YAB: "The Triumph of American Painting."

BB: Yes, the sheer triumphalism of the discourse—I don't blame it on the artists.

HF: Some embraced it.

YAB: But others were not happy with it at all. Newman again was absolutely opposed, for example.

HF: But might some of this triumphalism be compensatory, that is to say, wish-fulfilling? I mean there was an enormous sense of inferiority among American artists around World War II vis-à-vis ▲ European art—in Gorky, in early Pollock ...

BB: I've always disliked that argument because I think American modernism was fairly sophisticated even then.

YAB: And the inferiority complex mostly disappeared when the

● Surrealists arrived in New York and were demystified.

HF: But in an earlier moment it was still active, and Pollock and company didn't have the earlier American modernism—of Stieglitz and his circle—to draw on as a resource.

BB: Why is that edited out or forgotten? By Greenberg and other critics, and by us too, again and again, generation after generation? We all tend to say American modernist art begins with Pollock. I would find the argument of the inferiority complex more generative as an idea if I could understand what it originated in, and why it resorted to a nation-state identity.

RK: But early on there were already international connections. For example, the Museum of Modern Art founded an international council in 1953; early on they decided to make a concerted incursion into European art. When this council revved up, its effect was to promote the idea of an imperial cultural modernism that went with the Marshall Plan.

YAB: But that started even before, and at first outside of MoMA—in the State Department immediately after the war. The first major exhibition of this program was called "Advancing American Art," and it was shown at the Met in October 1946 before splitting into two groups of works, one small exhibit traveling to Cuba and Latin America, the other, larger one going to Paris and other European capitals such as Prague. It contained works by the first generation of American modernists—the Stieglitz group was well represented—but it was on the whole a mixed bag (Thomas Hart Benton, Ben Shahn, etc.). It was a rather successful diplomatic coup in Europe, though its reception in the States was very controversial, with angry congressmen protesting against the use of taxpayers' money. The State Department program continued its activity until 1956, when

it was abruptly terminated after protests against "communist-inspired art." It was at this point that MoMA's International Council began to really roll.

BB: That's a nice arc: to go from the dream of a proletarian cultural sphere to avant-garde internationalism, and from there to the State Department and International Council of the Museum of Modern Art!

1 See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), respectively.

2 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

3 "This would amount to nothing less than the establishment of a perpetual revolution—perpetual because bent on unceasing radical criticism of itself. It is no wonder such an ideal has not been realized in the realm of politics, but it seems to me that the development of modernist painting over the past century has led to a situation that may be described in these terms." (Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], p. 218.)

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- 388** 1945 David Smith makes *Pillar of Sunday*: constructed sculpture is caught between the craft basis of traditional art and the industrial basis of modern manufacturing. RK
- 393** 1946 Jean Dubuffet exhibits his "hautes pâtes," which confirm the existence of a new scatological trend in postwar French art, soon to be named "*informel*." YAB
box • *Art brut* HF
- 399** 1947a Josef Albers begins his "Variant" paintings at Black Mountain College in North Carolina a year after László Moholy-Nagy dies in Chicago: imported to the United States, the model of the Bauhaus is transformed by different artistic imperatives and institutional pressures. HF
- 404** 1947b The publication of *Possibilities* in New York marks the coalescence of Abstract Expressionism as a movement. YAB
- 411** 1949a *Life* magazine asks its readers "Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?": the work of Jackson Pollock emerges as the symbol of advanced art. RK
- 416** 1949b Cobra, a loose band of young artists from Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam, launches its eponymous magazine, in which they advocate a return to "the vital source of life"; meanwhile in England, the New Brutalists propose a bare aesthetic adequate to the austere conditions of the postwar world. HF

1945

David Smith makes *Pillar of Sunday*: constructed sculpture is caught between the craft basis of traditional art and the industrial basis of modern manufacturing.

Suspended equally between the primitive and the puritanical, David Smith's (1906–65) *Pillar of Sunday* [1] perfectly expresses the formal and technical ambivalence of constructed sculpture in the forties. Organized as a totem pole, the work is a vertical agglomeration of mementos to the sculptor's rigid upbringing in the American Midwest (the church choir, for example, or the Sunday family dinner), topped by the image of a liberating, sexualized bird.

Executed in forged and welded steel that was then painted, the object declares a technical allegiance to the sculptural idiom through which Smith entered the field in the mid-thirties, namely the Cubist-identified constructed sculpture that had evolved out of ▲ collage at the hands of Pablo Picasso in the mid-teens and had been brought to a pitch of accomplishment in the late twenties in the work of Julio González (1876–1942). But if welded metal construction had meant the use of warped fins and bent wires in order to achieve the visual openness of what González called "drawing in space" [2], it had also implied the opportunistic incorporation of ordinary metal objects into the assembly, as when Picasso pressed a kitchen colander into service as the head of an otherwise schematic figure (*Head of a Woman* [3]), a throwback to his having used a real sugar spoon as the crowning element of his Cubist *Absinthe Glass* of 1914. And from this formal exploitation of the found object it was only a short jump to the possibilities of sounding its psychological resonance, which the Surrealists explored in a very different ● development of the idea of sculpture as a collage or an assemblage.

Free-standing collage

At the hands of the Surrealists, two variations were struck on sculpture-as-construction. The first was formal; the second, technical. The formal one had to do with the Surrealists' willingness to abandon the whole idea of drawing in space, which had been Cubism's original way of defying traditional sculpture, with its fetishization of closed volumes, whether in carved stone or cast bronze. If the objects chosen to enter a sculpture become candidates not on formal grounds, however, but on those of psychological association, then ■ they might come in any shape or substance—glass bottles just as well as metal scrap, fur-covered teacups just as easily as iron grids.



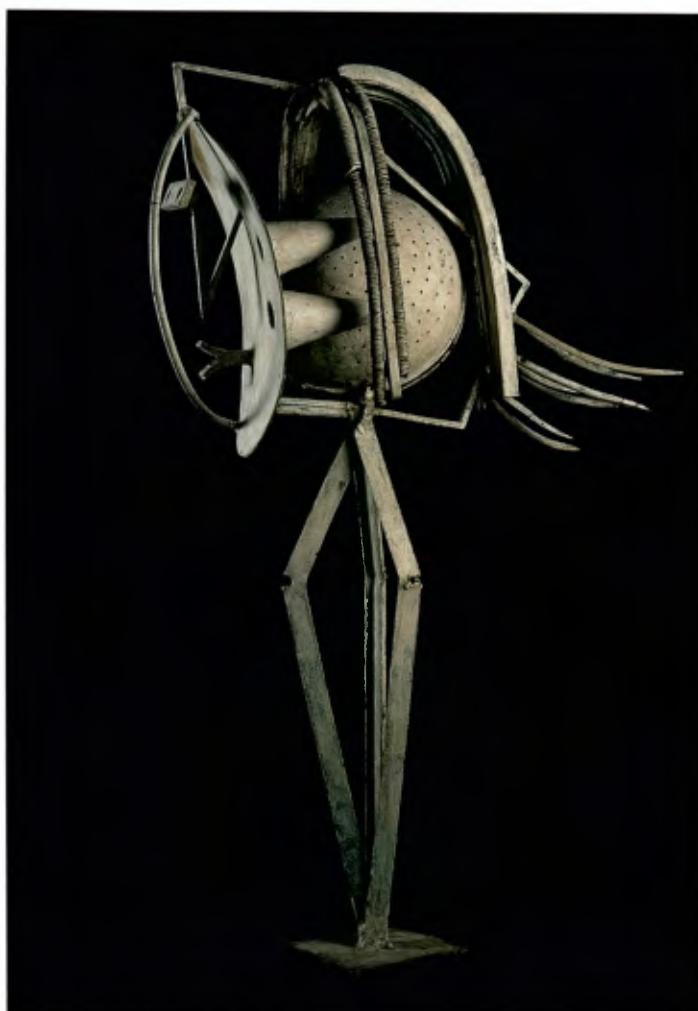
1 • David Smith, *Pillar of Sunday*, 1945
Steel and paint, 77.8 × 41 × 21.5 (31 × 16½ × 8½)

Salvador Dalí's *Venus de Milo with the Drawers* (1936)—a copy of the famous statue in the Louvre, with a row of little drawers, that one can slide in or out, stacked along the nude figure's torso—is a perfect example of the way Surrealist sculpture transgressed the modernist, formal credo of openwork construction.

At the technical level there was yet another transgression. The depths the Surrealists wished to plumb being those of the unconscious, they were also understood to be at variance with both the refinements of high culture and the rationalism of modern technology. Primitive in nature, the unconscious had been most forcefully given form, the Surrealists argued, by primitive art, a sculptural example which was both opportunistic—incorporating anything at hand, from trading beads to feathers to tin cans—and agglomerative, things hinged and hung and stuck together. So if the Cubist base for constructed sculpture placed the emphasis on *construction*, thus opening the way for a technological, highly industrialized model to interpret “drawing in space” as steel and ▲ glass forms of building (as in the work of Vladimir Tatlin or Naum



2 • Julio González, *Woman Combing Her Hair*, 1936
Wrought iron, 132.1 × 34.3 × 62.6 (52 × 13½ × 24½)



3 • Pablo Picasso, *Head of a Woman*, 1929–30
Iron and mixed media, 100 × 37 × 59 (39½ × 14½ × 23½)

Gabo), the Surrealist reception of it reinterpreted construction as *bricolage*, which is to say, a primitive form of making-do, of quasi-irrational, associative thinking.

This is the significance of the totem's having taken over the structural order of Smith's work in the mid-forties, as well as of his desire to exploit the charged memories of his youth and his willingness to incorporate figurative forms that, like the bird, are classically volumetric in nature. And, given the strength of this claim on his imagination, the artisanal and the figurative would continue to do battle with the industrial and the abstract throughout the rest of his career.

The most obvious place to see this is in the series of *Tanktotems* that Smith made during the fifties and into the sixties [4]. The “totem” half of this designation signals the persistence of a certain kind of emotive content, while the “tank” half—which refers to the industrial materials to which Smith was now turning, specifically here the tops of boiler tanks—addresses Smith's modernist ambitions, his desire for abstraction and technology. The struggle between these models is itself the source of the great formal interest of Smith's sculpture, as he managed his own peculiar marriage of abstraction and totemism in his ensuing work.

the primitive setting of the sacrificial table, which Smith had examined in far more figurative works such as *Head as a Still Life II* (1942), *Sacrifice* (1950), or *The Banquet* (1951), is once more made into the pedestal for a still-life assemblage that implies the presence, as well, of a human, sacrificial figure. This "figure" which consists of three elements tack-welded one above the other—a rectangular plane, an I-beam section set perpendicular to the plane and balanced on it only at one point, an equally precariously poised tank top—is unintelligible as a coherent, figurative form from most angles, reading instead as part of a collection of geometric shapes. Indeed, one of these shapes, a large, open rectangle, seems to be a kind of picture frame through which the artist is giving us a clue as to the correct approach to his work. It is only, however, by moving out of the axis of this frame and thereby eclipsing one's view of it, that the totem-object comes into miragelike focus, only to vanish again as the physicality of the steel forms (the forward thrust of the I-beam, for example) pushes it out of the "picture."

In this resistance to the idea of stereometric rationalism, whereby the intersection at right-angles of identical or similar profiles creates an object of maximum intelligibility, *Voltri-Bolton XXIII* refuses the

▲ Constructivist models that Smith's allegiance to modern materials and fabrication practices might otherwise seem to claim. The literal transparency sought by Tatlin, Rodchenko, or Gabo via their use of openwork mesh or clear plastics was only the material vehicle for an even more insistent conceptual transparency, as repetitive forms



4 • David Smith, *Tanktotem V*, 1955–6

Varnished steel, 245.7 × 132.1 × 38.1 (96½ × 52 × 15)

If the totem is basically figurative, a real object or animal invested with great significance for the human subject whose identity depends on it and who must therefore protect it, totemism is inimical to the aims of abstract art. The former can be brought into a relationship with the latter only if the sculptor's move to "protect" the totem-object takes the form of a kind of visual camouflage, the dissolution of the object's intelligible gestalt from any given viewpoint, something in turn made possible only by the feats of engineering—of suspension and near detachment—uniquely available to the industrial techniques of welding, cantilevering, etc.

Totem and taboo

This theme of the "totem-object both proffered and withdrawn" forms the consistent organizational armature of Smith's later sculpture, whether in the series of *Voltri-Boltons* (1962–3), welded of found steel parts, or in the sequence of *Cubis* (1961–5), put together of polished, stainless-steel polyhedrons, the last and most nearly abstract of his work. For in *Voltri-Bolton XXIII* [5], for example,



5 • David Smith, *Voltri-bolton XXIII*, 1963

Welded steel, 176.5 × 72.7 × 61 (69½ × 28½ × 24)

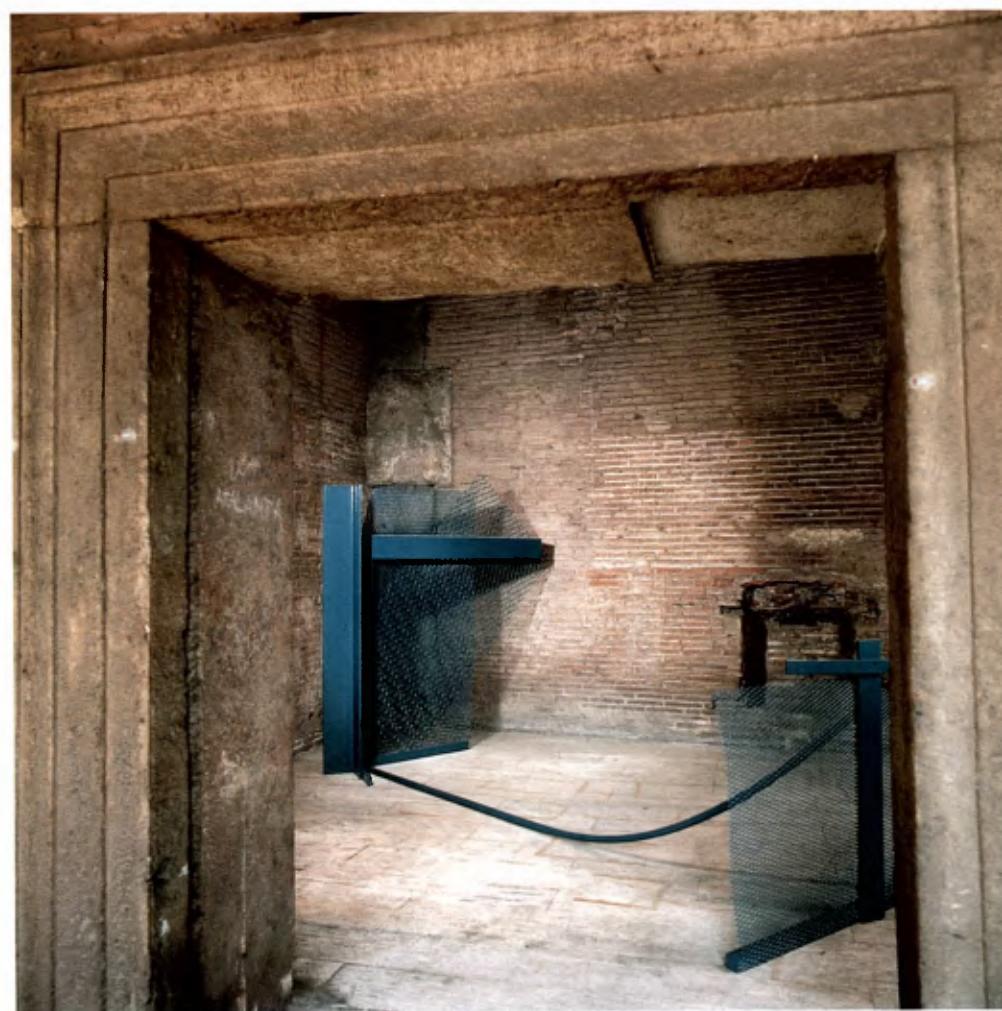
exfoliated from a coherent core in an imitation of technology's rationalization of both form and its production. And indeed, if the Russians' concept of stereometry further emphasized the possibility of simultaneous, collective experience of the work, which would be intelligible from any place within a space it thereby declared as truly public, the American's exploitation of unique, shifting points of view places his totems in the realm of the subjective.

Perhaps no one expressed the ambivalence that had settled onto postwar American and European sculpture more eloquently than ▲ the American critic Clement Greenberg, who set the critical terms for constructed sculpture in the late fifties. Arguing that sculpture's "genius" was now the function of a technologically modern concept of volume—"Feats of 'engineering' that aim to provide the greatest possible amount of visibility with the least possible expenditure of tactile surface belong categorically to the free and *total* medium of sculpture. The constructor-sculptor can, literally, draw in the air with a single strand of wire"—Greenberg interpreted the implications of this in a way that turned its back on the objectivity of "engineering" and instead embraced the subjectivism of a kind of visual phenomenon that he himself would call a "mirage." Characterizing the new technology through its release of open forms into "the continuity and neutrality of a space

which light alone inflects, without regard to the laws of gravity," Greenberg drew from this fact what some (in particular, the Minimalists) would see as perverse conclusions, insisting on its consequences as a form of opticality that "brings anti-illusionism full circle." Now, he argued, "Instead of the illusion of things, we are offered the illusion of modalities: namely, that matter is incorporeal, weightless, and exists only optically like a mirage" ("Sculpture in Our Time" [1958]).

The radical subjectivity of "opticality" could be associated with the open "frame" through which *Voltri-Bolton XXIII* had registered the importance of point of view for the understanding of the work, even if in this case its particular rectangle did not yield the "correct" aspect. For the frame not only opposes a visual to a tactile field, it also denies simultaneous collective connection to the meaning of the work, since only one person at a time can look through the frame at the precise angle perpendicular to its opening. It is this stress on point of view that the English sculptor Anthony Caro (1924–2013), David Smith's most obvious formal heir, then carried forward.

This is perhaps most obvious in a work like Caro's *Carriage* [6], in which two large planes stand opposed to one another across eight feet of space through which only a bent steel pipe bridges along the floor between them. Both of these planes are composed



▲ 1942a, 1960b

6 • Anthony Caro, *Carriage*, 1966
Steel painted blue, 195.5 × 203.5 × 396.5
(77 × 80 × 156)

of expanded metal to form a shimmering, optical mesh or screen, each being braced on three sides by steel channel elements which create for one of the planes a closed upper left corner, and for the other a closed lower right one. If the scale of the work appeals to one's tactile experience, since the object's physical expanse invites and allows entry into its midst and inspection of its parts, the filigree of its mesh, painted a sea green, is clearly pointing to the reabsorption of that physical, tactile condition by one that is more specifically immaterial and visual. The sense, furthermore, that this is indeed where the meaning of the work lies comes at the moment at which one's movement around the sculpture produces the coherence of the two sets of braces into the single gestalt of a "frame," one that collapses the physical space within the work and re-creates the sculpture as the function of a singular and purely optical point of view. But in turn, the physical openness of the object allows that "meaning"—which we could read as an abstract statement of coherence, the "*praegnanz*" of Gestalt psychology—to invade the sculpture from every other point of view so that, to use Michael Fried's terms for this, "at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest." Using language that clearly connects to Greenberg's idea of opticality, in his influential essay "Art and Objecthood" (1967) Fried characterized his experience of Caro in terms of the simultaneity and immediacy of the visual field itself:

It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.

The gauntlet Fried threw down in "Art and Objecthood" articulates the divide between the two self-proclaimed heirs of constructed sculpture: the hand-wrought, welded sculpture of Smith and Caro, with its craft associations of applied color and unique assemblage, on the one hand, and the industrially fabricated work of the Minimalists, with its commitments to technological coloration—enamels, plastics—and serial production on the other. But it is in the work of John Chamberlain (1927–2011) in the United States, and that of Arman or César in Paris, that one sees a third, far more pessimistic option. For whether opticalist or minimalist, the former two positions declare the positive, even utopian, possibilities encoded in modern materials and forms of production. It is the third, however, that marries "construction" with "production" and comes up with the conclusion of planned obsolescence and waste.

Indeed, pushing the found-object component of the medium, present within constructed sculpture from its very inception, way past Surrealist *bricolage* and into the ravages of consumer society, a sculptor like Chamberlain exploited the ready-made surfaces of the automobile body, recovered now from the crash-heap to which it had been consigned, as expendable scrap. Loaded with irony,



7 • John Chamberlain, *Velvet White*, 1962

Painted and chromium-plated steel, 205.1 × 134.6 × 124.9 (80 1/4 × 53 × 49 1/2)

a work like *Velvet White* [7] seems to project a whole history of modernist sculptural debate within its form—the tension between the claims of monolithic volume and openwork construction; the opposition between rationalized structure and Surrealist caprice; the distinction between craft and industrial color, as well as that between the mass-produced and the unique object, the former stripped of "aura," the latter clinging to it—even while, with its switch from production to consumption, from construction to readymade, it seems to announce the obsolescence of sculpture itself as a category. Perhaps this is why Donald Judd, in a move that seems surprising from a formal point of view, included a work by Chamberlain as one of the illustrations for his essay "Specific Objects," his declaration of the end of sculpture as a specific medium. RK

FURTHER READING

Michael Fried. "New Work by Anthony Caro," "Caro's Abstractness," and "Art and Objecthood." *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

Clement Greenberg. "Sculpture in Our Time" and "David Smith's New Sculpture," *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. Four: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993)

Rosalind Krauss. *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977)

Jean Dubuffet exhibits his “*hautes pâtes*,” which confirm the existence of a new scatological trend in postwar French art, soon to be named “*informel*. ”

After Dadaism, here is Cacaism.” Those words were penned by the French critic Henri Jeanson in response to “Mirobolus, Macadam & Cie, Hautes Pâtes,” the infamous exhibition of Jean Dubuffet (1901–85) held at the Galerie René Drouin in Paris in May 1946. Though published in the satirical weekly *Le Canard enchaîné*, they were perfectly in line with the general response to the show: from everywhere, from left and right, one could hear shrieks of disgust at Dubuffet’s “scatology.” This was not the first time that the painter had been decried by the press—his first solo exhibition of neoprimitivist, highly colorful scenes of urban life, a year and a half before, in the aftermath of the Liberation of Paris in August 1944, had been mocked as the feat of an infantile dauber—but now the uproar had reached a peak. If one excludes the commotion surrounding Picasso’s exhibition at the Salon de la Libération in October 1944—with demonstrations in the streets and iconoclastic attacks on the works—nothing had so shocked the French art world for decades, perhaps even since the Fauve scandal of 1905.

Jeanson’s witticism was less eloquent than the sarcasm of most critics, who took an obvious pleasure in detailing the “filth” they so condemned, but his reference to Dadaism points to a particular nexus of postwar Paris. The collective shame in the city was immense: shame for humanity as a whole at having implemented the Holocaust, but also more specifically shame for France and its collaboration with the Nazi machine. Because it could drape itself in martyrdom—calling itself “*le Parti des 75,000 fusillés*” (the party of the 75,000 gunned down), but also “*le Parti de la renaissance française*” (the party of the French Renaissance)—the Communist Party was seized upon as a moral buoy by a host of artists and intellectuals (Picasso being the most prominent of them). But it had little appeal for those who were appalled by the Communist-backed “*épuration*” following the Liberation—the public humiliation of petty collaborationists, the “popular” justice, and the execution of writers—this reminded them too much of the Stalinist purges of the late thirties), all the more since the Communist Party’s demand for a “socialist realism” was becoming louder every day.

Dubuffet was tempted neither by such self-righteousness nor by a mere return to the prewar status quo, with its perfunctory opposition, within the avant-garde, between the dreamland of Surrealism and the utopia of abstraction (which he saw as the two sides of the

same coin). In a climate as politically charged as that of the Liberation, there was little room for maneuvering. The Nazis had treated humanity as if it were sheer disposable or usable matter (photographic reports on the camps—showing piles of corpses but also of human hair—began to pour into Paris during the spring of 1945), and this demotion had been confirmed, at the other end of the world, by the atomic explosions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What was expected from art, in the reconstruction period, was a redemptive, sublimatory reaffirmation of humankind’s humanity—something akin, in the aesthetic realm, to the political “*épuration*” that was daily publicized in the press (in the sense that, despite the bad faith covering up a mere urge for revenge, the purges and punishments were intended to have the effect of a moral elevation). This is where the Dada provocation seemed a useful model of disobedience—for it, too, had originated in a climate of despair about humanity—even if, in the face of the most recent horrors, unprecedented even by the carnage of World War I, it had a sophomoric ring.

The catalogue of the “Mirobolus” exhibition, printed on cheap colored paper and folded in fours, contained a text by Dubuffet entitled “The Author Answers Some Objections.” The piece was also reprinted in several journals at the time, and republished just a few months later in the first (and most remarkable) of Dubuffet’s many books, *Prospectus aux amateurs de tout genre*, as “Rehabilitation of Mud.” Though this final title of the essay became famous as a catchword for Dubuffet’s whole enterprise, it blurs its initial polemical stance—the fact that it was addressing the anticipated reaction of an audience. The text opens on the issue of deskilling. Dubuffet underlines the fact that no special gift had presided over the making of the works in the exhibition, and that he had worked “here with [his] finger, there with a spoon.” Even though he rhetorically denies any intention of provocation, Dubuffet appropriates confrontational techniques of earlier modernism, and pushes the envelope in proposing even more radical gestures than those represented by the works on view, dreaming, for example, of paintings solely made of a “monochromatic mud.” To those who would question his attraction to “dirty things,” he replied in advance: “In the name of what—except perhaps the coefficient of rarity—does man adorn himself with necklaces of shells and not spiders’ webs, with fox fur and not fox innards? In the name of what, I want to know? Don’t dirt, trash, and filth, which are man’s



1 • Jean Dubuffet, *Volonté de puissance*, 1946

Oil on canvas, 116 × 89 (45½ × 35)

companions during his whole lifetime, deserve to be dearer to him, and isn't it serving him well to remind him of their beauty?"

Critics were prompt to read the mention of beauty as a deliberate provocation. They zeroed in on the "monochromatic mud" and gave "the dirt, trash and filth" its predictable excremental name. They were encouraged in that by the paintings themselves, with their brownish/grayish colors and their thick impasto (the *haute pâte*) of various materials, into which figures in full or three-quarter length had been incised [1]. Accentuated by the avoidance of any indication of the third dimension (all graffiti-like figures are either frontal or in full profile), the allusion to children's drawing was unmistakable. But if these works recalled kindergarten finger painting, gone were the attendant connotations of playful naivety. Brute matter had replaced color: for most critics it meant to say that the joy of life was no more. Dubuffet had expected to offend the "well read," as he called them, and the ensuing racket gave him confirmation that he had touched a sensitive nerve.

Dubuffet's few partisans, however, noticed that in wanting to rehabilitate mud he was not exactly claiming that "civilization" had ended—for them, on the contrary, he was offering the only redemptive strategy that could be found amid the rubble left after a cataclysm: to rehabilitate mud was to start anew, not exactly with a clean slate but from what was available, from what society *had* and *was* at this point of history. It was, in a dialectical twist whose irony appeared only later, to perfect a certain kind of "*épuration*." For if Dubuffet insisted that the sheer materiality of his work was on a par with the stuff and noise of the real, it meant that in the complex properties of natural objects "there was a certain order to discover." Nothing could better indicate how much Dubuffet's "*matièrisme*" ▲ is foreign to Georges Bataille's (1897–1962) notion of "base materialism" or "formless" in which matter is posited as that which cannot be framed by any discursive category, any systematic thought, or poetic displacement—as that which stubbornly resists the sublimatory function of the image and deflates it with a low blow. To discover an order (an image) within the formlessness of matter so that one can rehabilitate that matter is diametrically opposed to the operation of debasement envisioned by Bataille as the task of the formless.

Not only was a whole section of Dubuffet's catalogue essay devoted to the "suggestive power" of the various components of his pastes, but the catalogue itself was doubled by a small book written on the exhibited works by the critic-impresario Michel Tapié. Tapié's turgid prose is not only utterly unreliable but almost unreadable today (except for the amusing anecdote of a picture that Dubuffet had given to the writer Jean Paulhan, and that had melted), but Dubuffet's detailed captions of all the works, duly reproduced, were striking. They parodied entries of museum catalogues in giving succinct information about the material employed, but inevitably they slipped into a metaphoric mode (mostly in the culinary realm). *Monsieur Macadam* was described as "Entirely painted in ceruse [white paint] and real tar mixed with gravel. The kind of white batter thickly buttered upon the figure takes on the color of toasted bread where it meets the tar, like a

Art brut

Like other modernists, Jean Dubuffet was influenced by the study of the *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* by Hans Prinzhorn. Throughout the thirties Dubuffet corresponded with various doctors, and in the mid-forties he visited institutions in Switzerland, where he first encountered the psychotic art collected by the Geneva psychiatrist Charles Ladame. These experiences prompted Dubuffet to gather art of the mentally ill as well as tribal, naive, and folk art under the rubric *art brut*—*brut* as in "crude" or "raw" as opposed to "refined" or "cultural." Along with André Breton, Jean Paulhan, Charles Ratton, Henri-Pierre Roché, and Michel Tapié, Dubuffet formed the Compagnie de l'Art Brut in 1948, and soon thereafter they presented the first exhibition of its holdings (roughly 2,000 works by 63 artists) at the Galerie René Drouin in Paris. For this show Dubuffet wrote his best-known text on the subject, "Art Brut Preferred to Cultural Art," which casts the *brut* artist as a radical version of the Romantic genius free of all convention:

We understand by this term works produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture, where mimicry plays little or no part (contrary to the activities of intellectuals). These artists derive everything—subjects, choice of materials, means of transposition, rhythms, styles of writing, etc.—from their own depths, and not from the conceptions of classical or fashionable art. We are witness here to a completely pure artistic operation, raw, brute, and entirely reinvented in all of its phases solely by means of the artist's own impulses.

Like other modernists such as Paul Klee, then, Dubuffet idealized the art of the mentally ill as a return to pure "depths." But, unlike Klee, he defined these depths not as an *origin* of art, which one might hope to reclaim redemptively, so much as an *outside* to art, which one might cause to break into its cultural spaces transgressively. However, even as Dubuffet sought to undo the opposition between the normal and the abnormal ("this distinction ... seems quite untenable: who, after all, is normal?"), he reaffirmed the opposition between the *brut* and the cultural—an opposition that affirms rather than transgresses "civilization." And far from "unscathed," as Dubuffet imagines, the psychotic is scarred by trauma, and this psychic disturbance might be registered in the bodily distortions often evident in *art brut*—for example, eyes and mouths grossly enlarged or disruptively plunged into other parts of the body—disruptions that Dubuffet often reproduced in his own art. Indeed, through such derangements of the body image, he sometimes evokes a schizophrenic sense of literal self-dislocation, which would seem very far indeed from the "completely pure artistic operation" that Dubuffet otherwise wished to see in *art brut*.

used meerschaum pipe." *Madame mouche*: "Rough matter, matte at places and shiny at others, or as if it had been cooked and had vitrified. Figure with colors of caramel, eggplant, blackberry jelly, and caviar, adorned with egg-white holes in which a syrupy varnish of a molasses color has accumulated here and there." Each caption thus becomes a small prose poem in which the precedence of vision

over other senses, or at least the disembodied separateness of vision, is challenged (it should be noted that Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which this very feature of Western metaphysics was attacked, had appeared in 1945). But in the end, this anti-Cartesianism short-circuits, for Dubuffet's literary translation of the tactile given of the paste into the realm of food imagery remains based on the recentering force of metaphor, and thus on the illusionistic power of the gestalt, the form.

Food was on everyone's mind in postwar Paris (supplies were still very low and, contrary to one's expectations, they remained rationed for quite some time). It is thus not by chance that a high impasto that made paintings look like reliefs would invite culinary associations. Dubuffet encouraged critics to pursue this oral vein, for he began the text accompanying his next exhibition (held in October 1947), which was entirely devoted to portraits of friends and acquaintances in literary Paris, with a long excursus on the advantages of modest bread over the luxury of pastry (once again, Dubuffet's point concerned the beauty of the ordinary). But the first writer to allude to food as a trope for painterly paste was the poet Francis Ponge, whom Dubuffet knew well (Ponge had written the preface to the catalogue of his April 1945 exhibition of lithographs). In his first text on art—a small book on the impastoed paintings of an artist Dubuffet greatly admired, Jean Fautrier (1898–1964)—Ponge had laconically written: "It is part rose petal, part Camembert spread."

A deliberate frustration of vision

Soon both painters would reluctantly be cast as the founding fathers of a movement baptized "*informel*" by Paulhan and "*art autre*" by Tapié. A third "founder" was later spotted in the person of Wols (1913–1951), a German émigré whose real name was Wolfgang Schulze (but he had already died before the concoction of these labels). The exhibition of Wols's miniature watercolors at the Galerie Drouin in December 1945 went almost unnoticed: immediately after Fautrier's brute *Otages* in the same gallery, Wols's abstract landscapes populated by biomorphic forms were too clearly indebted to Paul Klee's meticulousness to raise even a stir. But things changed almost instantly when Wols began to work in oil on canvas, and his second one-man show in 1947 was a triumph. Though Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80) would not write his essay on the painter, "Fingers and Non-fingers," until 1963, Wols was unanimously seen as the quintessential "existentialist" artist who undergoes a metaphysical crisis and seeks to demonstrate the contingency of being. The drama of his life as an alcoholic bum, the alleged automatism of his pictorial procedures, the spasmic gesturality of his paintings—all these signs of "sincerity" led Sartre to cast Wols as an "experimentator who understood that he is necessarily part of the experiment." But in the end, for all the grand claims made about Wols's abstract canvases, each similarly composed of a centralized (often vulvalike) vortex out of which energetic rays spout in all directions [2], his art remained an invitation to "reading in," to deploy an "imaging" attitude (Sartre's word) that would always save us from having to contemplate the abyss of nothingness.

The sudden success of Wols's cosmic hallucinations was prepared by the scandal of Dubuffet's "*hautes pâtes*," whose scatology now seemed too crude a shock tactic. But the discomfort engendered by Fautrier's October 1945 exhibition of his *Otages* also played a major, if unrecognized, role. The fact that Fautrier belonged to the same intellectual milieu, exhibited in the same gallery, and was defended by the same writers as Dubuffet has clouded for too long what distinguishes them—even if, at least with regard to color, one could not fail to notice that they evolved in opposite directions (Dubuffet from vivid colors to mud, Fautrier, the reverse).

Ponge's inaugural "Notes sur les Otages" (Notes on the Hostages) was written in January 1945 at the request of Jean Paulhan (Paulhan's own "Fautrier l'enragé" had appeared in the catalogue of the painter's show in 1943). It was commissioned as a preface for Fautrier's exhibition of his *Otages* series, which opened at the Drouin gallery in October 1945. In the end, a short essay by André Malraux (1901–76) was preferred, and Ponge's extraordinary text was published in early 1946 as an independent book. Malraux had long been a supporter of Fautrier's art (he had already written about it in 1933), and, given his phenomenal notoriety at the time as a writer and a hero of the Resistance, it is not surprising that his text



2 • Wols, *Bird*, 1949

Oil on canvas, 92.1 × 65.2 (36 1/4 × 25 1/4)