

MESSAGES FROM THE MARGINS? CUBISM, COLLAGE AND CONTROVERSY

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Abstract

In this paper we argue that discussion of marginality can be informed by the particular exemplar and changing positioning of cubist art. After introducing the principles of cubist art and the loose periodisation of analytic and synthetic cubism, we concentrate on the latter to discuss cubism's shifting reception through the twentieth century, and to introduce three different views on the causes, extent and consequences of cubism's early marginal position. We then argue that just as cubism may not have been all that subversive, it may also not have been ontologically conservative, discussing a variety of positions on cubist realism and representation that belie simple categorisation or periodisation.

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MESSAGES FROM THE MARGINS? CUBISM, COLLAGE AND CONTROVERSY

In this paper we argue that discussion of marginality can be informed by the particular exemplar and changing positioning of cubist art that first appeared around 1907 and was evident until the mobilisation of troops in Europe for World War 1 in 1914¹. During the course of the last century, cubist art has been variously described as shocking, amusing, provocative, subversive and as highly influential. Once unacceptable to early 20th Century art dealers, cubist works take pride of place in prestigious galleries and museums worldwide and Picasso is now considered to be an “Old Master” (Daoust, 2003). Many later styles of twentieth century painting and sculpture can be defined either through their origins in cubism or in opposition to cubism (Berger, 1965; Chipp, 1968; Cottington, 1998; Hughes, 1989; Kozloff, 1973; Lemaitre, 1945; Read, 1986; Rosenblum, 1976), and it has been claimed that cubism has a legacy that influenced all subsequent Western art (Antliff and Leighton, 2001). The history of cubist art exemplifies the journey from the malady of marginality to the pleasure of periphery and in the sections below, we introduce cubist art, comment on this shift from margin to mainstream, and then draw on commentaries by the critics Crow (1985), Cottington (1992) and Poggi (1992a) to complicate this overly simple progression.

Although cubist art may appear an unusual visitor to the domain of organizational theory there is much about the style and ideology of cubism to recommend its study by organizational writers. Said to embody the essence of modernism (Clark, 1999; Herwitz, 2000), the cubists championed a revolutionary approach to representation and introduced techniques of discontinuity, fragmentation, reflexivity and multiple perspectives into their works.

CUBIST TECHNIQUE

Present in the domains of plastic arts, music, dance, sculpture and literature, cubism emerged in Paris and flourished quickly in Europe between 1907 and 1914. The cubist style was first developed by painters and although there are many artists whose works have been called cubist, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque have been credited with being its creators or pioneers (Berger, 1965; Cooper and Tinterow, 1983; Rubin, 1989). Author Gertrude Stein, poet Guillaume Apollinaire, and composer Igor Stravinsky are just a few other key artists from other artistic genres whose works during the pre-world war one years have also been labelled as cubist (Dubnick, 1984).

Although cubism was expressed in many media, many of the principles of cubism are most easily discussed by reference to visual materials, and it is here that we concentrate our discussion. Although Cooper (1995: 7) identifies diversity amongst the practising cubists he concluded that “the typical Cubist picture lacks perspective and employs geometric forms, restricted colour and a liberal manipulation of visual appearances”. Cubist technique included shifting planes, fractured form, and spatial ambiguity, and included the following features:

- (a) planes that are at once transparent and opaque;
- (b) tones of objects which “bleed” out and become background tones so that the object is part of, and at the same time in front of, the background;
- (c) outlines that coincide with other outlines so that the continuity may be read around either or across both;
- (d) surfaces which recede behind other surfaces and project over them simultaneously;
- (e) shadows, mutually excluded by each others’ light sources, standing side by side;

1 Like so much of the detail of cubism, there is no consistent view on what years constitute the cubist period. Many such as Chipp (1968), Fry (1966), Golding (1959/ 1988) and Read (1959/1986) nominate the years 1907-1914 as “The Cubist Years”. On the other hand, Pierre Daix, the most respected chronologist of Cubism (see Rubin, 1992) refers to the cubist years as spanning 1907-1916. Another noted art historian Clement Greenberg (1956) suggests Picasso painted some of his strongest synthetic paintings during 1915 and 1916 and refers to Braque’s cubist paintings from the nineteen twenties. Bois (1992: 169) sums up this dilemma with “It is never easy to know where to start when one deals with cubism, just as the beginning of cubism itself has been a litigious topic for rather a long time”.

- (f) parts of objects shifted away from the whole and then changed in tone so that the recognition of the original will be constantly elusive;
- (g) shadows which become substance;
- (h) flat planes which disappear behind themselves;
- (i) shapes created by arbitrary changes of tone competing with the shapes of the recognizable objects within which they are developed;
- (j) forms whose contours pass over other forms while their local tones disappear beneath them;
- (k) interlocking light and dark forms either of which can be seen as the “object” against the other as background (Judkins, 1976: 22).

While cubist painters were contemptuous of any efforts to develop theory or provide theoretical explanations of their work (Chipp, 1968; Hess, 1975; Kahnweiler, 1971; Kozloff, 1973), it has been suggested that cubism was representative of modern art in that it contained reference both to an ideology of optimism and to one of despair (Schwarz, 1997). The responses of modernist artists to this paradox were strained and ambiguous – a desire to create a balance between innovation and tradition, order and chaos, unity and disunity and the known and not known (Crowther, 1993; Schwarz, 1997; see also Clark, 1999, Greenberg, 1961). In this context,

Cubism created an artistic language of intentional ambiguity. In front of a Cubist work of art, the spectator was to realize that there was no single interpretation of the fluctuating shapes. Textures, spaces, and objects could be complete in itself. And, in expressing this awareness of the paradoxical nature of reality and the need for describing it in multiple and even contradictory ways, Cubism offered a visual equivalent of a fundamental aspect of twentieth-century experience (Rosenblum, 1959/1976: 14).

Herwitz (2000) has even argued that cubism embodies the hallmarks of modernism – discontinuity, reflexivity and multiple perspectives. Similarly, tracing the development of thought during the nineteenth century that led to giving up “stubborn old beliefs” [in objectivity, in single perspectives, in “steadily and whole” and so on], Everdell (1997: 347) identified five major and related ideas that define modernism – subjectivity, reflexivity, relativism and inductive scepticism - and at “[t]he heart of Modernism is the postulate of ontological discontinuity”. Things are not whole and stable. Things can fall apart and fragment. The separateness of the phenomena mean things are difficult to grasp. And things may not be connected (Allen, 1999). Introducing all these features into their visual aesthetics, cubism is the exemplar of modernism (Clark, 1999).

The cubists believed artistic traditions that revered mono-dimensional perspectives fixed in time and space to be a visual untruth. Their discontent with such untruth inspired them to capture a reality they knew as well as could see and to develop techniques they believed represented a reality and its truths. Surfaces were fractured, planes were fragmented and distorted, colours were stripped. Artefacts of Parisian café life, newspapers, advertisements were adhered to the canvases, ripped, scrawled on and alluded to. Part-bodies and part-objects were distinct and uncertain. Ambiguous shapes could be read. Blank canvases were to be understood.

Cubist technique was considered revolutionary in its creation of a new pictorial vocabulary, for each element of the vocabulary of painting – space, form, colour, light and technique – was worked, re-worked (some say distorted), interpreted and reinterpreted (Golding, 1988). Rules of single-point perspective were discarded, not only in the portrayal of an image on a painting but also in the demands made of the viewer to share the search for a reality promised by multiple perspectives.

This concept of simultaneity became a major feature of the style (Cottingham, 1998; Golding, 1959/1988, 1994; Hess, 1975), and stressed the role of artistic invention in selecting and synthesising the mix of remembered and seen elements of a subject (Cottingham, 1998). Accordingly, Braque, Picasso and later their colleagues did not paint objects as seen from a fixed and single-point perspective but combined several different views of the same object within the same picture (see Featherstone, 1988).

While art historians such as Fry (1966) and Rosenblum (1959/1976) have applauded the cubists for their revolutionary challenges to ‘western’ mimetic traditions, cubism maintains commitment to the representation of a reality. Although many observers may have been aesthetically and visually challenged by the cubist representations of objects, those objects do have a material presence and cubist portraits, still-lives and the few landscapes all contain a logic and coherence consistent with their content. Although cubist paintings did not maintain the traditional visual and spatial logic of perspective, the landscapes included images of trees and houses, the still-lives had an object congruency and the portraits portrayed people, invariably friends and business connections, either seated or standing.

Thus, from this standpoint, cubism’s realism was never in question. Although this meant that objects may not be presented as they seem, there is nonetheless a something or a someone or an object that is represented, and, supporting the idea that cubism depicts reality most completely, Gamwell (1980) suggests the multiple views allowed the artists to present all aspects rather than an incomplete aspect of nature. Cubist artists also strive to present the fragmentary nature of perception and seek to represent of “the integrity of the individual moment of perception before consolidation by memory into the perceptual whole” (Dubnick, 1984: 4).

However, this orthodox view of cubism’s realism has also been subject to some complication. For example, it has been suggested that it in cubist representation a new reality is created:

In film and theatre, in music and the written word, Cubism’s insistence *on the role of representation in the production of reality* [our emphasis] has been a cardinal point of reference, indeed at times, of principle (Cottingham, 1998: 75).

Further, and as argued by Rosenblum (1976), even those objects faithfully presented as “real” are just as false as more abstract images on a canvas. In referring to this paradox, Vargish and Mook (1999) suggest the use of visual deceptions is a cubist game to point out that realism is not about reality.

THE CHALLENGES OF CUBIST STYLE

What has challenged viewers and readers since cubist art first appeared in salons in Paris and later in other European cities has been, not the content, but the presentation of that content. For cubist art it is the visual that is shocking – the colour (or lack of), the shape, the form, the attempts at representation; for cubist literature it is the structure that is shocking - the repetition, the grammatical complexity, the tortured syntax. For whether a style, a method, an approach, an art-form or an intelligence (Schwartz, 1971), cubism is not always comprehensible or decipherable. Remembering that cubism preceded many styles embraced by abstraction, the contemporaneous audiences had no experience of the demands of “reading” abstract art. The first challenge for an audience was thus to establish some sense of what was being represented, and to find some connection between the substance and placement of materials and the title that indicated what was being represented. There was the matter of the complex relationship between the realness and not-realness of art and the more puzzling question of how to establish what is indeed the artistic object.

Indeed, the disconnection of cubist style was a constant challenge to accepted visual protocols. Cubism demands from its audience the necessity to engage in a relationship with the artistic endeavour – and the viewer is challenged to find his or her own meaning and understanding from the object observed. From the distance of this history it is difficult to imagine the sense of “astonishment and bewilderment” (Ozenfant, 1952: 68 - 73) invoked by the cubist paintings in their first exhibitions. The cubists’ dealer Kahnweiler also described more extreme reactions (cited in Poggi, 1992a: 126)

For at that time, people went to the Independents [Exhibitions] to get mad or to laugh. In front of certain pictures there would be groups of people writhing with laughter or with rage.

With obvious contempt for the debate to be endured by the arrival of early cubism Ozenfant (1952: 76) sneered,

... everybody went on and on arguing about it [cubism], until it was enough to send you to sleep as you stood, or waken the dead, or destroy the living and the dead too.

It is clear that subject to such public ridicule, cubism was an art at the margins and yet it was an art that experienced pleasure at the periphery. One of the many terms used by critics to describe the styles of Cubism, includes a reference to the early years of Cubism as hermetic (Cottingham, 1998; Roskill, 1985). Their intent in so doing was to make explicit Picasso and Braques' isolation from not just the artistic community in Paris but indeed the rest of mainstream Paris. Although Picasso and Braque enjoyed some notoriety in artistic circles, Picasso's works were never publicly exhibited and Georges Braque did not exhibit between 1908 and 1914. Both had an exclusive arrangement with an art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, and the artists relied on the dealer to sell their works privately to discerning patrons who embraced the modern and the *avant garde* (Chipp, 1968; Kahnweiler, 1971). After 1908 very few Cubist paintings were shown publicly – or perhaps more correctly, it was only the “minor Cubists” who exhibited at the Salons and exhibitions in Paris (Kahnweiler, 1971). Because they did not exhibit in the public exhibitions Picasso and Braque escaped the controversies in which the other Cubists became embroiled – away from the public eye and controversy neither painter commented in print or in lectures on their work. Thus, although considered the leading forces in the new style, their contribution was not initially acknowledged to or by the general public. And yet despite and perhaps because of the arguments and the criticisms of cubism, it has endured to reach the respectability that, as a movement, it had originally so passionately rejected.

Mention has been made of hermetic as one of the descriptors of cubist style. Despite Rubin's² (1992: 454) contempt for the “absolute mincemeat made of even the most developed periodicity”, many critics have tried to identify different periods within the brief years of cubism, hermetic being just one of many of these terms. Referring to the delineation of cubism into what he referred to as the salami-slicing, sub-stylistic terms (Rubin, 1992: 452) there were enough distinctions in styles and approaches nonetheless to justify some labelling of the differentiation. Yet another label that has extensive currency (see Barr, 1980; Golding, 1959/1988; Kahnweiler, 1971) is synthetic cubism to describe a distinct style that could not be categorised as conventional art and thus required a new category of art – *papier collé* or *collage*³ (Frascina, 1993). Created first by Braque and quickly taken up by Picasso⁴, during 1912 and 1913 collages included a collection of “real” and readily identified objects. Picasso and Braque, amongst others produced a series of works that included scrap materials such as newspapers, material, wallpapers, cloth, corrugated cardboard, sand and labels. These scraps of reality were intrinsic to the creation of the image and yet the pasted objects were not utilised to enhance a sense of a reality to the presented image.

Although the subject material of *papiers collés* or *collages* were consistently still lifes of such objects as bottles, glasses and musical instruments, as if to confuse the audience's grasp of what was real within the paintings, Braque used his skills as a *peintre-décorateur* (house-painter and decorator) to paint surfaces that mimicked the reality of a pasted wood grain or caning material. To establish the realness of an object was without value – for ultimately all were faux objects whose contribution was to the composition of the image on the canvas, and not to the representation of the object that served as the title of the painting. For instance, Braque's painting entitled *Still Life with Violin* (1912), includes the pasting of a wood-like veneer (*faux bois*) to the canvas. The pasted veneer borders and traverses the simple charcoal lines drawn to imply the shape of the violin. The material basis of the musical instrument is thus suggested rather than confirmed. The reality

2 William Rubin is the Director Emeritus of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, New York and curated two significant exhibitions at MOMA – one on the cubist years of Picasso and Braque in 1989 and the other on the portraiture of Picasso in 1996.

3 *Collage* is a French colloquial expression for two people living together (ie. pasted) (Kozloff, 1973). *Collage* is also understood as a technique that involves the pasting of objects such as labels, calling cards, fabrics and other materials. *Papiers collés* refers to *collages* made from various kinds of papers only (Antlif and Leighten, 2001). Prior to cubism these techniques had been confined to the domain of craft and sentimental valentines (Poggi, 1992b).

4 Bois (1992), following Rubin's curatorial presentation of the *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* exhibition at MOMA in 1989/1990 argues it was Braque who first experimented with *papier collé* and Picasso who first introduced *collage*. Picasso is reported in Greenberg (1959) to have argued the lead in the innovation of this technique into “high art”.

of the real objects was to serve as a visual blind to the audiences' efforts to identify the subject. For the cubists, the how of the representation assumed a dominance over the what that was being represented.

CONSTERNATION WITH *COLLAGE*

Still Life on the Margins

As mentioned, the works created in the synthetic cubist style, were, with very few exceptions still lifes (Golding, 1959/1988; Read, 1958) or, as they would have been known when created and exhibited in Paris, *les natures mortes*.⁵ Still life can be understood as a painting whose subject matter is limited to inanimate objects (Sterling, 1959). Still-life painting had a history that dated back to the paintings and mosaics of ancient Rome (Ebert-Schifferer, 1999; Sterling, 1959; Weisberg, 1979) reaching its zenith with the Dutch and Flemish masters of still life in the seventeenth-century (Ebert-Schifferer, 1999). Despite this very august history, still-life, as with cubism, has been subject to considerable criticism and scorn by academic art historians (Bryson, 1990; Ebert-Schifferer, 1999) with more than one author referring to the marginality of the genre (Bryson, 1990; Weisberg, 1979). This relegation of still-life painting to lower forms of art has a history of many centuries most clearly articulated in the rules of the French salon during the seventeenth century in which historical themes were ranked as the highest artistic achievement and the still life the lowest acceptable level (Weisberg, 1979). By choosing to use still life as the genre for collage, synthetic cubism was maintaining a consistent position on the margins. In the main, the subjects of many traditional still lifes are a visual and sensual delight of food, flowers and receptacles, such as bowls, bottles, glasses and vases; the subjects of many synthetic cubist paintings are musical instruments, bottles, glasses and occasionally, food. The visual imagery is rich and often filled with colour. With its profusion of sensuality, it may then be a surprise to note that not only was still life located on the margins, but it was also a genre imbued with a philosophy that would be known today as democratic (Weisberg, 1979).

Charles Sterling (1959) considered to be “the father of still-life studies” (Ebert-Schifferer, 1999) has argued a true still life emerges from the decision made by a painter to choose a group of objects as subject and then arrange them to make a coherent picture. And perhaps what is even more significant is the point articulated by Sterling (1959: 47) that “Each object stands in isolation so as not to conceal its neighbour”. Still life is not an image of spontaneity or randomness but is instead the depiction of a conscious and deliberate arrangement of objects. And because the view of each object is not obscured, the individual entity of each object is asserted within the group composition. The gestalt of still life that assumes the deliberate arrangement of objects in which all that serves as figure can be viewed without obstruction assumes then a spirit of egalitarianism. Within still life, no object takes precedence over any other, and no object is compromised in its portrayal. Is it this essentially democratic feature that privileges no object over another or is it the subjects themselves of the still lifes that contributed to the contempt of the art world?

Cubism has been called an art without tension (Golding, 1994; Hughes, 1989) and an art of the banal and mundane (Vargish and Mook (1999). Again, this commitment to the commonplace is consistent with the traditions of still life. Sterling (1959:11), in tracing the history of still life to Greek and Roman times reveals that still life was originally known by the Greek term of contempt of *rhopography* which signified the depiction of insignificant objects derived from the domain of the domestic, the prosaic and the commonplace – food, implements, artefacts and objects found in domestic interiors and on kitchen surfaces.. This was in contrast to the meaning of *megalography*, a term used to describe the art of the sublime, the grand, the significant, the spiritual portrayed in religious, historical, familial narratives in grand paintings. Still life thus depicts those things that are trivial “that ‘importance’ constantly overlooks” (Bryson, 1980: 61). Considered

5 Sterling (1959) argues the word still life emerged from the Dutch term *still-leven* or silent life or life without motion. In the late seventeenth century the French made reference to paintings that were *en vie cove* or had arrested life; which was replaced in the following century to *nature repose* or things at rest. According to Sterling (1959: 43), it was the members of the academic circles who, during the Romantic period opposed the aesthetic excesses of the Baroque and coined the term *natures mortes* to show their contempt for that genre of painting. Although the French “deplore the term *nature morte* as poor or even misleading in its implications” (Sterling, 1959: 44), the term has nonetheless remained.

the art of the trivial, the objects were by assumption humbled; and the genre of still life that depicted humble objects can confidently be understood as an art of democracy (Weisberg, 1979).

Subversion by *Collage*

This essentially ideological feature of still life is readily apparent in the still lifes of the synthetic cubists, who depicted the familiar objects of bars and cafes frequented by the cosmopolitan habitués in the early decades of the twentieth century. Vargish and Mook (1999) suggest the portrayal of the mundane objects by the Cubists served as a challenge to what was expected of bourgeois high art. So too, their technique of *collage* which Picasso and Braque used, thus elevating what had been previously a domestic and sentimental craft, that is a craft of the feminine, into the domain of art (cf. Markowitz, 1994; Wolfram Cox and Minahan, 2002). The use of mass-produced and readily available materials from daily life, the introduction of glue (a tool for house painters and not artistic painters) and the shift of artist as painter to one who cuts, places and glues has been interpreted as an ideological assault on high art and its market amongst the bourgeois élite (Antliff and Leighten, 2001; Cottington, 1992; Crow, 1985; Poggi, 1992a). Although the Cubists' work has been portrayed as a subversive assault on high art (Poggi, 1992a), there has been a tradition of diminishing the art of a still-life painter to be little more than a craftsperson (Weisberg, 1979). With cubists however, the popular culture or low art of still life was now incorporated by legitimate artists into high art. Using an essentially democratic genre the cubists used the style of collage as an art of political subversion. And for many, the ideological attack was expressed as contempt, perhaps no better summed up than by the art critic and historian, Alfred Barr (1940/ 1980: 80) when he wrote: "Look", said Picasso and Braque arrogantly, "we can make works of art out of the contents of our waste baskets".

Not only was the technique of *collage* revolutionary, so too, argued some critics, was the content (Antliff and Leighten, 2001; Poggi, 1992a). Picasso was known to be influenced by communism (Burns, 1982) and an example of his anti-war⁶ and political sentiments are apparent both in the reportage of the atrocities of the wars in the newspaper cuttings and the use of the colours of the *tricolore*⁷ used in his *Glass and Bottle of Suze* (1912) (see Antliff and Leighten, 2001; Cottington, 1992).

CUBISM AT THE MARGINS: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF CROW, POGGI AND COTTINGTON

Perhaps the strongest proponent of the view that cubism was not only marginal but also subversive has been Thomas Crow. In his (1985) essay *on Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts*, Crow described cubist *collage* as a renewal of *avant-garde* identification with "marginal, 'non-artistic' forms of expressivity and display" (Crow, 1985: 233). For Crow, the *avant-garde* appropriation of "devalued or marginal materials" is an example of "low-cultural forms [being] called on to displace and estrange the deadening givens of accepted practice, and some residuum of these forms is visible in many works of modernist art" (Crow, 1985: 234). For example:

Cubism is readable as a *message from the margins* not only in the graphic content of the intruder objects, but in their substance and organization as well. The printed oilcloth and wallpaper substitutes for solid bourgeois surfaces.... As such surfaces soon degrade, peel, flake, and fade, ..., so collage disrupts the false harmonies of oil painting by reproducing the disposability of the late-capitalist commodity. The principle of collage construction itself collapses the distinction between high and low by transforming the totalizing creative practice of traditional painting into a fragmented consumption of already existing manufactured images (Crow, 1985: 252; emphasis added).

Crow also argued that cubist collage illustrates a pattern of "provocation and retreat" among modernist movements, for cubism was "overtaken" and "smoothly incorporated as a source of excitement and crisp simplification within an undeflected official modernism" (Crow, 1985: 255). For Crow, "this pattern of

6 The Balkan Wars were fought between the Russians, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and their respective allies during 1912 and 1913; a war involving Britain, France and other European nations was also seen to be inevitable at that time (Antliffe and Leighten, 2001).

7 Not just the official flag of France but symbolic representation of the ideals of Liberté, Egalité and Fraternité.

alternating provocation and retreat indicates that these equations [between high and low] are, in the end, as productive for affirmative culture as they are for articulation of critical consciousness” (Crow, 1985: 255). High art in the form of easel painting is renewed rather than threatened, but while the repetitive “translation of style from margin to center evacuates the form of its original vividness and subtlety”, so form new, more marginal positions and new, more extreme recruits. However,

The cycle of exchange which modernism sets in motion moves only in one direction: appropriation of oppositional practices upward, the return of evacuated cultural goods downward. When some piece of avant-garde invention does re-enter the lower zone of mass-culture, it is in a form drained of its original force and integrity (Crow, 1985: 258).

In contrast, Cottington (1992) has suggested that cubist subversion of high art was never particularly marginal in the first place. Placing his discussion of the cubists within the particular context of growing French nationalism and deepening class conflict in the early twentieth century, Cottington (1992: 64) argued that “the avant-garde was ... one of the primary sites of resistance to the hegemony of nationalism”. While he saw the grouping of Picasso, Braque, Kahnweiler, Uhde, Gertrude Stein, Apollinaire, Fernande Olivier and Marcelle Braque as “tenuous and heterogeneous”, he also suggested that its members shared a “belief in the social autonomy and superior truth of art” (1992: 66) that meant that Picasso and Braque’s “putative subversion of high art could only circle back on itself” (1992: 70). For example, and with reference to *Braque’s Newspaper, Bottle, Packet of Tobacco* of spring 1914, Cottington (1992: 70) wrote that:

The result of using roughly cut, torn, and perforated pieces of paper is at once to exaggerate their scrap, throwaway nature and yet to use these edges as formal elements in the composition, to turn them to effect in an aesthetic game which effaces their humble origins; a demonstration of art’s transubstantiating powers.

Thus, for Cottington, the paintings of Braque and Picasso were “emblematic of a resistance indeed to bourgeois culture, but one coming from closer to its center than Crow’s “message from the margins” would have us believe” (1992: 67).

Concentrating more on the consternation with cubism than with either its commodification or aestheticism, Poggi (1992a) discussed the negative reactions to Cubist multimedia works and Picasso and Braque’s subsequent refusal to exhibit in the Parisian salons that were the most usual channel for young artists of the time. By 1913, Picasso, Braque and Gris were represented solely by the dealer Kahnweiler, and “the three major Cubist artists remained out of view to all but a small number of friends, critics and collectors” (Poggi, 1992a: 125). Poggi argued that their absence from and disdain for the crowded, less exclusive salons was noted, a consequence being that a “mystique” developed about them that led to high prices for the works of Picasso and, to a lesser extent, Braque. For Poggi (1992a: 125), the artists’ absence from exhibiting through popular channels “seems to have been a shrewd manoeuvre in terms of contemporary exhibition conditions and the workings of the market”.

CUBIST REPRESENTATION: COMPLICATING ORTHODOXY

Thus, these three authors present very different views on the causes, extent and consequences of cubism’s marginal position. If, instead, we turn to cubism’s more conventional take on representation, we can see that not only is its marginality subject to debate, but so too is its centrality.

It was the cubists who made explicit that our knowledge of the world is carried by memory into every perception – that what we see is coloured by what we know (Steiner, 1978). As a result, and as we have noted above, cubism has been called the art of conception and not perception (Chipp, 1968; Cottington, 1998; Gamwell, 1980; Kozloff, 1973; Reff, 1992), and one of the most important contributions of cubists to subsequent thought and art was their emphasis on the observation and representation of reality (Vargish and Mook, 1999).

It has been argued that the cubists were influenced by the contemporaneous French philosopher, Henri Bergson (see Hess, 1975), by the scientific developments of Einstein (Berger, 1965; Everdell, 1997; Vargish and Mook, 1999), by non-Euclidian geometry (Apollinaire, 1913/1970), and by the developments of Idealism and Symbolism in poetry and art (Barr, 1946/1980; Steegmuller, 1973). What was central to each of these prevailing influences was the challenge to traditional relationships of and within time and space. Previously thought to be immutable, it was now possible for the observer to be detached from a fixed position (Hess, 1975), and hence the cubist emphasis on multiple perspectives discussed above. The cubists saw that the role of art was to represent and not copy the subject (Schwarz, 1997; Vargish and Mook, 1999) and they were aware of the distorting influence of relationship (emotional, temporal or spatial) to any event (Berger, 1965).

Indeed, some cubists even questioned the very possibility of ontological realism. In their pamphlet on cubism published in 1912, the artists, poets and critics Gleizes and Metzinger state with force “there is nothing real outside ourselves” and express amazement that critics may suggest that an external image can be represented on canvas. Arguing that reality is both profound and complex, the authors continue, suggesting that, “rationally speaking, we can only experience certitude in respect of the images which they produce in the mind” (1912/1968: 208-214). For Gleizes and Metzinger, reality exists essentially as consciousness – and whatever exists is known as ideas. For these artists, the role of art was to give physical shape and form, which they referred to as “plastic consciousness”, to those ideas. Thus, the art they created was the physical manifestation of the reality they experienced in their minds and not a literal representation of what they may (or may not) observe.

Thus, both cubism’s subversive marginality and its ontological realist centrality have been questioned as well as affirmed. For example, and with respect to the latter, the paradox apparent in the use of illusions of mimicry in the quest for a true representation of reality is nowhere more apparent than in the use of *trompe l’œil* in the synthetic period. As stated by Amédée Ozenfant (1952: 76-77):

To hope to imitate sunlight with splodgy colours, or translate into actual colour the vibration of the light, was inevitably (at least theoretically) to come to grief. Representation, they said, was never anything but a wretched *ersatz*: light from paint tubes, questionable flesh-tints, nature falsified: and the closer representation was to the object in question, the more flagrant was its deceptiveness, for what could be more false than *trompe-l’œil*: and at bottom, what vainer than the theatre, when it would have us believe in its reality?

The Cubist painter no longer sought to imitate. His [sic] object was to evoke emotions by the exhibition of coloured forms, which, not being comparable with aspects of reality, evaded the falsities inherent in *trompe-l’œil* painting. Representational painting is like music that would claim to give us the illusion of a storm on a gramophone record: all the instrument could do would be to make questionable noises, which, by sufficiently reminding us of the real sounds, would make us realise how false they were.

He concludes his point with the essence of his argument:

To paint true, is to evoke in the observer exact sensations and appropriate feelings, and not fallaciously to imitate.

Conclusion: Cubism and Homeopathy

Thus, reality could not be imitated as *trompe l’œil* but was, nonetheless, parodied by the introduction of *trompe l’œil*. Further, the paradox of *papier collé* imposed a reality in imagery abstracted from reality. But this was a reality that was created - a conception and not always a perception. And yet a reality, nonetheless.

Sixty years after his cubist period, Picasso commented, apparently with some exasperation, that ... everyone talked about how much reality there was in Cubism. But they didn’t really understand. It’s not a reality you can take in your hand. It’s more like a perfume – in front of you, behind you, to the sides. The scent is everywhere but you don’t know where it comes from (cited in Kozloff, 1973: 51).

Drawing parallels between the concept of the arbitrariness of the sign formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course of General Linguistics* published in 1916 and the arbitrariness of the vocabulary of an African mask, Bois (1987) suggested Picasso played with the realization of the value of the minimum sign. Just as a cowry could be an eye and a navel and a mouth, Picasso seized on the awareness that a mere handful of signs, “none referring univocally to a referent” (Bois, 1987: 53) had the potential to provide multiple significations. Thus a shape could be a mouth, or sometimes a nose, or the detail of a guitar. Similarly, and while most cubist painting contained as subject matter only those objects that might plausibly be seen together in one place (Fry, 1966), cubist writer Gertrude Stein (1914) wrote in *Tender Buttons* that: “A shawl is a hat and hurt and a red balloon and an undercoat and a sizer a sizer of talks” which provides only a very loose association of objects and meanings.

In conclusion, such representational allusion is perhaps more akin to homeopathy than to either mimesis or constructivism, for the relationship between signs and referents is loose and based on minimal traces. It is this looseness that is part of both the frustration and the intrigue of cubist art, for this art is both subversive and central, representational and conceptual and also dependent on when, how and by whom it is regarded. In other words, margin-centre dynamics are not only mutually constituted (cf. Cooper, 1986) but also highly situated. While we have based our argument mainly within visual cubist art of the synthetic period, we have done so in a deliberate attempt to suggest that cubist art and the critics of the art belie simple categorisation or simple periodisation, and that the complication of marginality and of representation are not the exclusive preserve of the postmodern.

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