art demand a culturally elite audience? For most artists, political commitments are primarily verbal or symbolic. For the Surrealists, as an example, "the task is not one of realizing abstract ideals but of liberating human beings, beginning with a series of very concrete liberations: that of the faculties, tendencies, or elements that have been repressed, concealed, or perverted."11 For most Western artists, the aesthetics of transcendence was, in the final analysis, a personal transgression made urgent by social chaos.

Notes

7. Sylvia Harvey, May ’68 and Film Culture (British Film Institute, 1978), p. 45.

"Notes on Cubism, War and Labour"

1985

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In early Cubist collages, Picasso and Braque often used newspaper columns. The collages were produced in the years immediately preceding the First World War, a period of considerable labor strife and uneasiness over the mounting diplomatic initiatives that led to the war, particularly the Balkan crises. According to art historian Roger Craneshaw, newprint about these political events was aestheticized within the collages. They commented on the political wars of modern art, on the anonymity and alienation of the artist, and the need to remove decorative ornamentation from the art surface.

Many political issues can be located directly within these collages, for example, about the politics of media. During this period, nationalistic propaganda in newspapers became something of a scandal of misinformation and cover up, with mass publishing playing a central role. Like media in our era, it intercepted and virtually restaged diplomatic reports, fracturing events into simplified headlines and "plainspeak." The abstraction of political news by media was increasing at the same time that the strategies of abstraction and collage were developing in the fine arts.

* * *

I am writing at the end of 1984. The end of a preordained annus mirabilis in which many of Orwell's presentiments have been fulfilled, if only in the vulgar and debased form of caricature. The world in 1984 has been haunted by the fear of war.

My aim is to align the cubism of Braque and Picasso with the struggles of the French working class movement during the years prior
to World War I. In France during that period, the vanguard of the working class sought peace as the means to protect its livelihood, its communities, and its human dignity.

I wish to insist upon, and to celebrate, the naked violence of Braque’s and Picasso’s cubism. A violence aimed—through pacific action to be sure—at every preconception of the nature of pictorial production that was, and is, inscribed within the bourgeois discourse on ‘Art’ and its ‘History’. Many writers have described Les Demoiselles d’Avignon as an embodiment of such a will to violence. I believe that the violence was maintained and intensified in the joint practice of Braque and Picasso until, at least, the autumn of 1912; that their violence was informed and sustained by their identification with the aims of the (potentially) revolutionary syndicalism of the French labour movement during and up to the same approximate date.

Normal art historical discourse does not attempt to account for a violence that it does not (and maybe cannot) acknowledge. Instead, Cubism in general is described as a celebration of innocence, as an optimistic art free of the anxieties born of World War I and the Bolshevik revolution. Cubism, in other words, is described as a characteristic product of ‘la belle époque’. John Berger, for example, describes Cubism as the expression of the spirit of an epoch which in fact only seemed ‘beautiful’ in retrospect:

Dadaism and Surrealism were the result of the 1914 war. Cubism was only possible because such a war had not yet been imagined. As a group the Cubists were the last optimists in Western art... They expressed their enthusiasm for the future in terms which were justified by modern science. And they did this in the one decade in recent history when it was possible to possess such enthusiasm and yet ignore, without deliberate evasion, the political complexities and terrors involved. They painted the good omens of the modern world. [My emphasis throughout].

I can do no better than contrast this representative example of the art historical construction of the period prior to 1914 with a typical social-historical account of the same period:

During the immediate pre-war years the social climate deteriorated seriously. The big strikes of miners in 1906, postworkers in 1909, and railway employees in 1910 were severely repressed by Clemenceau and Briand but paralysed the economy for a time. Syndicalism even infiltrated the civil service despite government warnings of the incompatibility of syndicalism and service to the state... the foundations of society seemed to have been shaken during these years which, for the bourgeoisie, were years of fear.

The same author adds, however, that: ‘Nevertheless, after the catastrophe of World War I, this same period became known as ‘la Belle époque.’”

(Though not, one must add, simply because of the weather—that “Indian Summer”—but because it was a period of low inflation and “safe” money).

We can, it seems, disinvest ourselves of the notion that the cubists were able to express an imputed “optimism” for the future “without deliberate evasion” of social and political realities. Indeed, a new question arises, namely: to what extent does the Cubism of Braque and Picasso acknowledge the tensions and anxieties not of a “belle époque” but of the “avant-guerre”?

A version of Robert Rosenblum’s paper titled Picasso and the Typography of Cubism, published in 1973, is prefaced by a full-page reproduction of Picasso’s Glass and Bottle of Suze (DR523). Rosenblum argues that commentators should not remain indifferent to the ‘potential verbal meaning or associative value’ of the newspaper texts, advertisements, logos, and other printed ephemera that are a feature of cubist paintings. Nowhere, however, does Rosenblum choose to confront the issues raised by the contents of the newspaper columns that make up most of the surface of Glass and Bottle of Suze. In line with the notion of Cubism as an essentially “optimistic” art, Rosenblum describes only those uses of the printed word which contribute to a “clandestine and witty” process of punning jokery.

There is nothing “clandestine” about the contents of the newspaper texts on Glass and Bottle of Suze. But they do serve to puncture the idea of a “belle époque” Cubism. With the exception of the text at the extreme left of the work (and the placing of the column is significant), the texts (most of which are applied upside down) refer to events taking place in the (Second) Balkan War. The ‘Left’ column, however, describes the staging of a large antiwar demonstration, staged by the French labour movement, to protest and to guard against the possible spread of the war by way of the system of Big Power alliances (something which was not to happen, and then with terrifying rapidity, until the summer of 1914). The demonstration took place at the Pré-Saint Gervais, during the afternoon of November 17, 1912. An arrow, which is also the rim of an ‘Analytical Cubist’ wine glass, points to a column heading titled ‘L’ordre du jour.’ The latter describes how the meeting agreed to support a policy of pacifism and international proletarian solidarity. Four days after this demonstration, which numbered between 20,000 and 50,000 people (the former according to the police, the latter according to the organisers—nothing changes!), a special congress of the Section Française de
l'Internationale Ouvrière demanded that in the event of the war in the Balkans spreading to encompass the whole of Europe, the response should be:

...a recourse to revolutionary means, general strike or insurrection in order to forestall the conflict and to seize power from the ruling classes who would have unleashed such a war.

The Confédération Générale du Travail also held a conference in November to consider “the organisation of the resistance to the war,” and was committed “in the case of war between the powers” to respond with a “revolutionary general strike.” In this context, when the fear of war was, in the words of Jean Jaures, a “spectre rising from its grave every six months to terrify the world,” it is surely permissible to suggest that in Glass and Bottle of Suze, Picasso invites us to drink to (the wineglass/arrow) an “ordre du jour” which embodies a commitment to proletarian internationalism, antimilitarism, and world peace. Indeed, one can force the issue in order to counter the notion that the painting is merely a celebration of bohemian café society: Suze is an apéritif concocted from the herb “gentiane” (as the label on the painting tells us). The herb, according to Pliny, was named after Gentius, king of Illyria (i.e. the name given to the Balkan states in Classical times). Are the events that the texts on the painting refer to an “apéritif”, an “opener,” to war or to revolution?

Several other less complex works from the autumn of 1912 use newspaper cuttings which refer to the Balkan war, all of them by Picasso. Picasso’s pacifism in later life has been widely chronicled, and we also know that he was associated with anarchist and syndicalist circles in Barcelona and in Paris. We can, then, begin to construct an argument which suggests that, for Picasso at least, the will to violence which was the decision to make Cubism was motivated in part by identification with the aims and ideals of the French labour movement during the “avant-guerre.”

When we attempt to situate both Picasso and Braque on the broad spectrum of often antagonistic political views that characterised the extremely volatile world of petty-bourgeois bohemian opinion during the period, it becomes clearer that, whatever their personal opinions may have been, the two men would have been situated on the “Left” of the political divide, in a world where the political “Centre” had collapsed. This is especially the case if we consider the nature of Braque’s and Picasso’s relationship to the art market. Their dealer, that is, was—in the eyes of the political “Right”—a combination of “the enemy within” and “the enemy without.” Daniel Henry Kahnweiler was Jewish and German. Not only was he a member of the two main ‘race enemies’ of the French “family,” according to the perverted doctrines of the protofascist groups that clustered round Charles Maurras and Action Française, but he was also—as was Picasso—a métèque, a foreign worker.

But in a much more intimate and immediate way the relationship of Braque and Picasso to Kahnweiler would have encouraged them to redefine their role as “artists,” and in so doing to identify themselves as “proletarians.” By 1912, Kahnweiler had become the sole purchaser and agent of the total oeuvre of Braque and Picasso. By 1912, the two painters were no longer using their dealer as a vendor (maybe among others) of particular works. Instead, they were selling to a single agent the total control of their labour-power as artists, and were doing so for a period of three years. Such a dealer-artist relationship was sufficiently novel that we can suggest that Braque and Picasso may have situated themselves in the ranks of “alienated labour” quite self-consciously. That they did so is confirmed by Kahnweiler himself, who remembered that:

...at the end of the month...they were coming to get their money. They arrived, imitating labourers, turning their caps in their hands: ‘Boss, we’ve come for our pay’ [My emphasis throughout.]

What did it mean to be a pacifist, to be situated to the ‘Left’ of the political divide, and to identify oneself (however playful) as a ‘worker’ in 1912? Annie Kriegel says that:

...one cannot present anti-militarism of the period before 1914 as a marginal current of some dreamers and déclassés; quite the contrary, antimilitarism is at the heart of the political thought of the world of labour.

It would appear, then, that the situation of Braque and Picasso, in 1912 and probably for several years previously, coincided with what Tim Clark has called “the meanings of the dominated.” But what were the effects of that coincidence?

The violence of their practice is the answer. A violence contained and intensified by their remorseless silence. Braque’s and Picasso’s refusal to speak, to explain, their Cubism was itself a sign of their refusal to signify those objects, concepts, themes and values deemed to be significant within the bourgeois art historical discourse. This is not the place to explore the full extent of their refusal, but I will mention three elements of it which are particularly relevant to my argument.

Anonymity: against the demand that the work of art should signify the integrity of the creative consciousness of an individual artistic subject, Braque and Picasso posited a joint practice which aimed at anonymity
Alienation: writing of Cubism in 1917, Braque insisted that it is “the means employed...that determine the style, engender new form and impel to creation.” No longer was it enough merely to represent the condition of alienation, as Picasso’s early work had done. Now the very act of representation, and the nature of what could be represented (including the imputed “self” of the artist) were to be subordinated to the “limits and limitations” of the “means employed”—which is to say, of the means of production. In opposition to the notion that the artist is the only person in the modern world who is not alienated, due to the nature of the work, Braque and Picasso, especially in the period of High Analytical Cubism, made the work of art an alienated labour. The very hermeticism of their labour, its silent introversion, reminds one of Jarry’s monstrous ‘Painting Machine,’ which ‘after there was no one left in the world’:

...revolved in azimuth in the iron hall of the Palace of Machines, the only monument standing in a deserted and razed Paris...[and] dashed itself against the pillars, swayed and veered in infinitely varied directions, and followed its own whim in blowing onto the wall’s canvas the succession of primary colours ranged according to the tubes in its stomach.9

Elsewhere Jarry wrote that “it is the Machine that may achieve the great Geste Beau in spite of our aesthetic will” (a strange vision which haunts our nightmares in 1984: how will the computers amuse themselves after they have fulfilled the logic of Mutually Assured Destruction?). From the summer of 1910 to the summer of 1912, Braque and Picasso locked themselves within the mechanics of their joint mode of protection. I do not believe that they enjoyed the experience. Part of the violence of their Cubism—its extremism—is contained in the violence the two men were prepared to do their selves.

Anti-décoratif: décoratif, the word describes many aspects of a painting, but it characterises a work of art as, above all, a sedative, as a salve to the jaded nerves of the bourgeoisie. In the privacy of his ‘drawing room’ the bourgeois could use his décorations, said Monet, as a ‘refuge of peaceful meditation’, where ‘nerves exhausted by work’ (by bourgeois work) could relax. Matisse also dreamed of:

...an art of balance, purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he businessman or writer, like an appeasing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue.9

With the emergence of a bourgeois clientèle, the heroic vision of Courbet and Manet of a popular and public art celebrating the experience of the masses had been “privatised.” One should not forget that Clemenceau, throughout the war, but also during his premiership (1906–9) (which was marked by the use of state violence against the trade unions, including the killing of strikers by police and army) used Monet’s paintings, and his house and gardens at Giverny, as a “mental soother.” Only a case of extreme critical myopia could describe the work of Braque and Picasso as décoratif in the sense in which the term was used during the cubist period. The use of a very dull, even muddy palette, the coarseness of technique, the adulteration of materials, the use of waste materials, the radical “unfinish” of the paintings, combined to produce a profoundly in-affective and offensive art.

That the Cubism of Braque and Picasso did not effect very much “offence” does not detract from its offensiveness. Avant-garde art had been marginalised, critical controversy no longer served as a screen behind which political positions could be signified, as was the case during the first three quarters of the nineteenth century. From this purview, Glass and Bottle of Suze would appear to be a critically significant work. Critical in the sense that it embodies resistance to a particular mode of bourgeois cultural discourse, but critical also in the sense that it stands as a meditation on the marginality of avant-garde art, and of the role of avant-garde artist, in the modern world. For in order to signify anything beyond its own coming into being, the work has to rely on alternative, nonpictorial means of signification: the linguistic sign in general, the newspaper text in particular. In Glass and Bottle of Suze the signs of bohemian café life are framed by the struggles of the international working class movement. In 1912, Picasso as a pacifist with syndicalist leanings could identify with that struggle. But as an artist he could not en-form, transfigure, or even illustrate the “meanings of the dominated,” all he could do was to indicate them with a toast—the arrow/glass rim is a very poignant sign.
To pursue the Cubism of Braque and Picasso beyond Glass and Bottle of Suze would be to see the retreat from the more extreme implications of the work of 1910–12 become a rout. Indeed some of the signs of that retreat are already evident in Glass and Bottle of Suze. That day in August 1914, when Braque travelled north to join his regiment, marks the symbolic ending of everything that was vital in Cubism, and in French avant-garde painting in general. Similarly, the very fact that the war began marked the end of the credibility of the parliamentary socialism of the Second International. It also profoundly damaged the credibility of an ideal which we all need now, maybe as never before: the notion of international working class solidarity.

For a while, however, maybe from 1907, certainly from the summer of 1910 to the autumn of 1912, Braque and Picasso, through the sustained force of their violence—which was not violence at all, of course, but counterviolence—became the instruments of what was a very circumscribed and marginalised “revolution,” but one which remains the most destructive and the most extreme in the history of Western art. The extremism of their refusal to signify can only be understood in the contexts of the anxieties of their time, anxieties which sadly, and maybe fataly, still haunt the world in 1984.

Notes

3. Robert Rosenblum, Picasso and the Typographic of Cubism, in Penrose and Golding (eds.) Picasso 1881–1973, London, 1973, pp. 46–56. Rosenblum dates Glass and Bottle of Suze 1913; Dalix and Rosselet date it Autumn 1912. This makes it one of the earliest cubist collages. It also carries more text than any other collage, and I cannot help believing that Rosenblum’s blindness to the contents of the texts is a case of wilful suppression of “embarrassing” information.

Zurich as a center for the development of Dada ideas, theories, and performances is described by Richard Huelsenbeck as a refuge where the claims of church and state could be assessed without being put into jail. Dada is portrayed as a purely political response to the conditions of war and the collapse of “postclassical middle-class culture.”

Zurich would seem a curious choice for a politically charged movement like Dadaism, a withdrawn city in neutral Switzerland. But in 1916 it became a haven for draft evaders from central Europe, who made up the core of the movement. Dada began at the Cabaret Voltaire, while the most costly battle of the war raged in France at Verdun. Every time the location for Dadaist activities shifted, whether to Berlin, New York, or Paris, and each time the war news changed or the “peace” afterward grew more violent, Dadaism was redefined to the point where Dadaists who went to Berlin (like Huelsenbeck) tended to harbor resentment toward Dadaists who stayed in Zurich. And yet, despite the variety of Dadaism, it all operated with at least one common proviso: to invent “antiart” for the morning after the death of bourgeois civilization.

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I first met Hugo Ball in Munich in 1912. He was then dramaturg with the Kammerspiele. He immediately impressed me by his superior intelligence and his profound knowledge of things. We became friends. With the help of Hans Leybold and Klabund we founded the Revolution, which was our form of resistance to Imperial Germany. Ball wrote a poem against the Virgin Mary which brought about the journal’s downfall. Several law suits were launched against us and we were scheduled for the same fate as Panizza. But they failed to realize that we were