



In the Name of Picasso

Author(s): Rosalind Krauss

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *October*, Vol. 16, Art World Follies (Spring, 1981), pp. 5-22

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778371>

Accessed: 03/09/2012 16:48

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *October*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

In the Name of Picasso

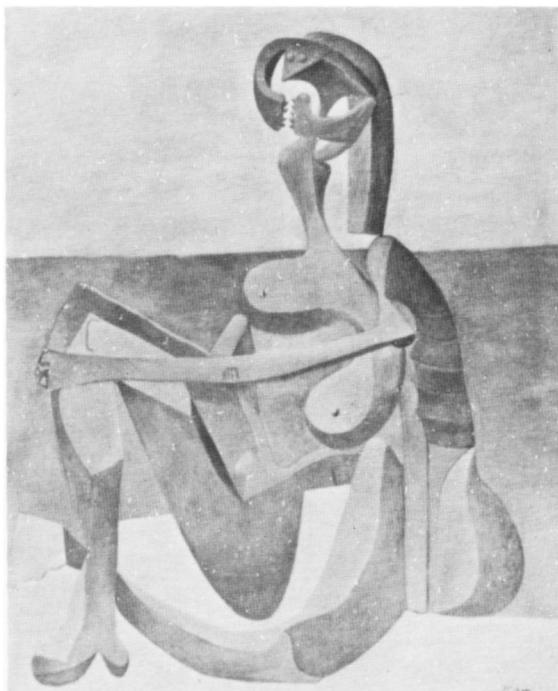
ROSALIND KRAUSS

Exhibit A: Picasso's Seated Bather, 1930. Against an azure wall of water, fragments of bone and bleached carapace assemble the monumental image of isolated, predatory woman. Woman-as-insect, with great mandibles in place of mouth evoking more effectively than any Masson or Miró the threat of the *vagina dentata*, this painting has functioned for years as a major emblem of Picasso's affinities with surrealism, as it has also established his preoccupation with an especially surrealizing notion of metamorphosis. The Museum of Modern Art showed the picture in 1939, and then again in 1946, at both major Picasso exhibitions. Thereafter it entered the collection to be placed on permanent view and to be installed—permanently it had seemed—within a particular “view” of the 1930s Picasso. This was a notion of a metamorphic “style” concerned with the body as a loose assembly or construction of parts often suggestive of found objects. This style was fundamental to the early sculpture of David Smith, as it was to the early painting of Gorky and de Kooning. They understood it as a mode or manner having a rather general application: that of biomorphic construction to create an image of transmutation. Not only artists, but generations of students imbibed this conception of the Picasso of the '30s and this particular style.

Exhibit B: Picasso's Bather with Beach Ball, 1932. Against a pale cobalt sea and sky, the monumental form of female adolescence is assembled from a collection of pneumatic parts: bulbous bones so pumped with air that the figure appears to float. As a pendant to the *Seated Bather*, this work displays a contrary mood, a lugubrious sense of play instead of the earlier image's desiccated wrath. But in all those conditions that we would call style the paintings are nearly twins. Both exploit a simple backdrop to force a sculptural experience of their theatrically isolated forms. Both conceive the figure as constructed out of parts whose provisional coherence effects a transformation from one thing (bone, balloon) to another (pelvis, breast).

Exhibit C: At a lecture this fall at the Baltimore Museum of Art, William Rubin, one of the leading Picasso scholars, showed both paintings.¹ With these

1. The lecture was presented on October 12, 1980, at a symposium on the cubist legacy in twentieth-century sculpture.



Pablo Picasso. Seated Bather. 1930. (Left.) Bather with Beach Ball. 1932. (Right.)

two works, he said, we find ourselves looking at two different universes—and by this he meant different formal as well as symbolic worlds. This is hard to understand; as difficult as if someone pointed first to a Hals portrait of a Dutch militia officer and then to his rendering of the *Malle Babbe* and maintained that they were products of different styles. But Rubin was insisting on this difference, a difference become incontrovertible by the very fact that behind each picture there lay a real-world model, each model with a different name: Olga Picasso; Marie-Thérèse Walter.

We are by now familiar with the sordid conditions of Picasso's marriage in the late '20s, as we are with his passion for the somnolent blond he met when she was seventeen and who was to reign, a sleepy Venus, over a half-dozen years of his art. But in Rubin's suggestion that Olga and Marie-Thérèse provide not merely antithetical moods and subjects for the pictorial contemplation of the same artist, but that they actually function as determinants in a change in style, we run full tilt into the Autobiographical Picasso. And in this instance Rubin himself was the first to invoke it. The changes in Picasso's art, he went on to say, are a direct

function of the turns and twists of the master's private life. With the exception of his cubism, Picasso's style is inextricable from his biography.

With the Museum of Modern Art's huge Picasso retrospective has come a flood of critical and scholarly essays on Picasso, almost all of them dedicated to "Art as Autobiography." That latter phrase is the title of a just-published book on Picasso by an author who sees everything in his work as a pictorial response to some specific stimulus in his personal life, including the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, which she claims was made in an effort to exorcise "his private female demons."² This same author, who proudly pounces on a mish-mash of latter-day accounts to "prove" that Picasso's turn-of-the-century decision to go to Paris to pursue his art was due to his need to "exile himself from Spain in order to escape his tyrannical mother," provides us with a delicious, if unintended parody of the Autobiographical Picasso.³

But prone to parody or not, this argument is upheld by many respected scholars and is attracting many others. John Richardson, of course, took the opportunity of reviewing the Museum of Modern Art exhibition to forward the case for the Autobiographical Picasso. Agreeing with Dora Maar that Picasso's art is at any one time a function of the changes in five private forces—his mistress, his house, his poet, his set of admirers, his dog (yes, dog!)—Richardson exhorts art-historical workers to fan out among the survivors of Picasso's acquaintance, to record the last scraps of personal information still outstanding before death prevents the remaining witnesses from appearing in court.⁴ Richardson's trumpet has been sounding this theme for over twenty years, so on this occasion his call was not surprising. But the Autobiographical Picasso is new to William Rubin and that this view of matters should now hold him convert is all the more impressive in that it had to overcome the resistance of decades of Rubin's training. Rubin's earlier practice of art history was rich in a host of ways of understanding art in transpersonal terms: ways that involve questions of period style, of shared formal and iconographic symbols that seem to be the function of larger units of history than the restricted profile of a merely private life. So the Rubin case is particularly instructive, all the more because in his account the personal, the private, the biographical, is given in a series of proper names: Olga, Marie-Thérèse, Dora, Françoise, Jacqueline. And an art history turned militantly away from all that is transpersonal in history—style, social and economic context, archive, structure—is interestingly and significantly symbolized by an art-history as a history of the proper name.

2. Mary Mathews Gedo, "Art as Exorcism: Picasso's 'Demoiselles d'Avignon.'" *Arts*, LV (October 1980), 70–81.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 72; see also *Art as Autobiography*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

4. John Richardson, "Your Show of Shows," *The New York Review*, July 17, 1980. Eugene Thaw uses Richardson's essay as an occasion for his own attack on art as autobiography. See, "Lust for Life," *The New York Review*, October 23, 1980.

I can call nothing by name if that is not its name. I call a cat a cat, and Rolet a rogue.

—Boileau

A proper name, we could say, is a token without a type. Not transferable and not reusable, it applies only to me. And I am its complete significance. The proper name completes, exhausts itself in an act of reference. Aside from labeling the object that is its bearer, it has no further meaning, and thus no “sense” such as other words have. Those words, like the common nouns *horse* or *house* have definitions: a set of predicates by which we grasp the concept that can be said to be their sense, or meaning. But a proper name has no such definition—only an individual who bears the name and to whom it refers. That is not only common sense, but it is the view that philosophy held until the end of the last century.⁵ But then this traditional no-sense view was attacked first by Frege and then by Russell.⁶ Proper names, Frege argued, must not only have a sense, but in cases where one is naming a nonexistent character (like Santa Claus), they may even have a sense but no referent. Russell went on to enlarge this view by claiming that ordinary proper names are, in fact, disguised definite descriptions and thus we learn how correctly to apply a proper name by recourse to sets of characteristics. (Thus the “sense” of the name Aristotle is supplied by some or all of a set of descriptions, such as: a Greek philosopher; the tutor of Alexander the Great; the author of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. . . .) We could call this the intensional or sense view of the proper name; and it has been variously argued by the later Wittgenstein and by Searle,⁷ to be itself more recently challenged by a causal theory of nominal reference.⁸

In an extraordinary essay Joel Fineman has recently indicated the importance of the philosophical debate on proper names to literary theory and criticism:

The progressive and increasingly dogmatic subordination by philosophy of nominal reference, first to extension, then to expression, then to

5. John Searle writes: “Perhaps the most famous formulation of this no-sense theory of proper names is Mill’s statement that proper names have denotation but not connotation. For Mill a common noun like “horse” has both a connotation and a denotation; it connotes those properties which would be specified in a definition of the word “horse,” and it denotes all horses. But a proper name only denotes its bearer. See, Searle, “Proper Names and Descriptions,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, ed., New York, Macmillan, 1967, vol. 6, p. 487.

6. Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, Peter Geach, Max Black, eds., Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1960. This essay was first published in 1892. Bertrand Russell, “Descriptions,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, Jay Rosenberg, Charles Travis, eds., Englewood, Prentice-Hall, 1971. Reprinted from Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, London, 1919.

7. Thus Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Para. 40: “When Mr. N. N. dies one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies.” See also Para. 79. John Searle, “Proper Names,” *Mind*, LXVII (April 1958), 166–173.

8. This literature is anthologized in *Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds*, Stephen P. Schwartz, ed., Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977.

intention, and finally to a historicity that postpones its own temporality, in many ways parallels the development and eventual demise of an aesthetics of representation. That is to say, the perennial awkwardness philosophy discloses in the collation of word and thing is closely related to the uneasy relation our literary tradition regularly discovers when it connects literal to figurative literary meaning.⁹

Whatever its status within current considerations of literary representation, it is clear that the proper name has a definite role to play within current art-historical and critical notions of the relation between image and meaning.

Classical theories of mimesis would, like the classical theory of proper names, limit meaning to reference. A visual representation of something “means” that thing in the world of which it is a picture. “Hence,” Aristotle writes, “the pleasure [all men] receive from a picture: in viewing it they learn, they infer, they discover what every object is, that this, for instance, is such a particular man, etc.”¹⁰ A picture is thus a label—only a visual rather than a verbal one—which picks out something in the world and refers to it. And its meaning is used up in this act of reference. It is in this sense that the mimetic image (or representation) is like the traditionally understood proper name. Both are types of labels, modes of reference; in both cases the meaning is conducted through, limited to, just this referential channel. In this view both names and pictures would constitute representations that, in the philosophical sense, have extension but no intension. The meaning of the label extends over the object to which it refers, but comes to an end at its boundaries. It denotes the object. But it is without connotation or intension, without, that is, a conceptual status that would allow it to be applied over a plurality of instances, without, finally, general conditions of signification. In the classical sense of the proper name, it has a referent but no sense.

It is too obvious to need restating that art history was launched through a sense of, among other things, the inadequacy of classical mimetic theories to explain the multiplicity of visual representation over the course of world art. In a search for reasons for a particular culture’s maintenance of nearness or distance between its art’s images and their referents, art historians turned to a notion (or rather a whole host of notions) of signification. Thus we have Riegl insisting that late Roman sculpture is unnaturalistic because it intends a meaning that cannot be netted by, or completed within, the confines of that material object the sculpture could be said to represent. From its very beginning art history called upon a theory of representation that would not stop with mere extension (or denotation) but would allow for intension (or connotation). Iconology, as Panofsky presents it, would be unthinkable without such a theory. However, those

9. Joel Fineman, “The Significance of Literature: *The Importance of Being Earnest*,” *October*, no. 15 (Winter 1980), fn. 7, p. 89.

10. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Part I, Section V.

early generations of art historians almost never, themselves, theorized their own assumptions about representation. They simply took it as a given that it was in the connotative richness and density—that is, the intension—of the aesthetic sign, that it lay claim to being art at all. Its intension we could say, was taken as a record or index of the multiplicity of human meaning or *intention*; and they equated this capacity for multivalent content with the very capacity to conceive aesthetic signs.

No technical field is monolithic, and of course art historical practice has been divided about method, purview, and almost everything else one could name. But it is probably the case that, with very few exceptions, the unspoken assumptions about the intensive powers of visual representation were shared by most practitioners in the first part of this century.

Thus the revision in the theory of representation that is currently underway, in its overturning of those older beliefs, is all the more striking. The revision involves a return to a notion of pictorial representation as constituted by signs with referents but no sense: to the limiting of the aesthetic sign to extension, to the dependent condition of the classically conceived proper name. Although the epidemic of extension is widespread in art-historical practice, nowhere is it more virulent and obvious than in Picasso studies. And as I shall go on to demonstrate, nowhere should its spread evoke more irony.

*I have said everything when I have
named the man.*

—Pliny the Younger

What I have been calling an aesthetics of extension or an art history of the proper name can be likened to the detective story or the *roman à clef*, where the meaning of the tale reduces to just this question of identity. In the name of the one “who did it” we find not only the solution, but the ultimate sense of the murder mystery; and in discovering the actual people who lie behind a set of fictional characters, we fulfill the goal of the narrative: those characters’ *real* names *are* its sense. Unlike allegory, in which a linked and burgeoning series of names establishes an open-ended set of analogies—Jonah/Lazarus/Christ—there is in this aesthetics of the proper name a contraction of sense to the simple task of pointing, or labeling, to the act of unequivocal reference. It is as though the shifting, changing sands of visual polysemy, of multiple meanings and regroupings, have made us intolerably nervous, so that we wish to find the bedrock of sense. We wish to achieve a type of signification beyond which there can be no further reading or interpretation. Interpretation, we insist, must be made to stop somewhere. And where more absolutely and appropriately than in an act of what the police call “positive identification”? For the individual who can be shown to be the “key” to the image, and thus the “meaning” of the image, has the kind of singularity one is looking for. Like his name, his meaning stops within the boundaries of identity.

The instance of “positive identification” that led off the last dozen years’ march of Picasso studies into the terrain of biography was the discovery that the major painting of the Blue Period—*La Vie*, 1904—contained a portrait of the Spanish painter and friend of Picasso, Casagemas, who had committed suicide in 1902.¹¹ Until 1967, when this connection with Casagemas was made, *La Vie* had been interpreted within the general context of fin-de-siècle allegory, with works like Gauguin’s *D’Où Venons Nous?* and Munch’s *Dance of Life* providing the relevant comparisons.¹² But once a real person could be placed as the model for the standing male figure—moreover a person whose life involved the lurid details of impotence and failed homicide but achieved suicide—the earlier interpretations of *La Vie* as an allegory of maturation and development could be put aside for a more local and specific reading. Henceforth the picture could be seen as a *tableau vivant* containing the dead man torn between two women, one old and one young, the meaning of which “is” sexual dread. And because early studies for the painting show that the male figure had originally been conceived as Picasso’s self-portrait, one could now hypothesize the artist’s identification with his friend and read the work as “expressing . . . that sense of himself as having been thrust by women into an untenable and ultimately tragic position. . . .”¹³

The problem with this reading is not that the identification is wrong, but that its ultimate aesthetic relevance is yet to be proved or even, given current art-historical fashion, argued. And the problem of its aesthetic relevance is that this reading dissociates the work from all those other aspects, equally present, which have nothing to do with Casagemas and a sexually provoked suicide. What is most particularly left out of this account is the fact that the work is located in a highly fluctuating and ambiguous space of multiple planes of representation due to the fact that its setting is an artist’s studio and its figures are related, at least on one level, to an allegory of painting.¹⁴ Whatever its view of “life,” the work echoes such distinguished nineteenth-century forebears as Courbet and Manet in insisting that, for a painter, life and art allegorize each other, both caught up equally in the problem of representation. The name Casagemas does not extend far enough to signify either this relationship or this problem. Yet current art-historical

11. Pierre Daix, “La Période Bleue de Picasso et le suicide de Carlos Casagemas,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LXIX (April 1967), 245.

12. Anthony Blunt and Phoebe Pool, *Picasso, The Formative Years*, New York Graphic Society, 1962, pp. 18-21.

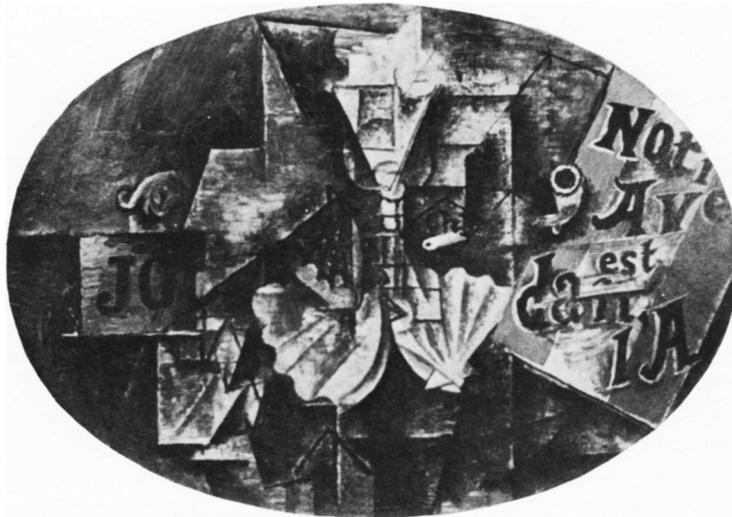
13. Theodore Reff, “Themes of Love and Death in Picasso’s Early Work,” in *Picasso in Retrospect*, Roland Penrose, John Golding, eds., New York, Praeger, 1973, p. 28.

14. At the beginning of his discussion of *La Vie*, Reff has no trouble locating the work: “the setting, an artist’s studio with two of his canvases in the background” (p. 24). But after “reading” it through the proper name of Casagemas, his account of the location changes and, curiously, “the setting is no longer necessarily an artist’s studio” (p. 28). This is a niggling detail, but I bring it to the attention of the reader who feels that there is nothing inherently objectionable to a history of proper names, since that merely adds another dimension to the interpretation of a given work. In practical fact, what we find in most cases is not addition, but restriction.

wisdom uses “Casagemas” to explain the picture—to provide the work’s ultimate meaning or sense. When we have named Casagemas, we have (or so we think) cracked the code of the painting and it has no more secrets to withhold.

La Vie is after all a narrative painting and this close examination of its dramatis personae is an understandable (though insufficient) response to the work. The methodology of the proper name becomes more astonishing, however, when practiced on the body of work inaugurated by cubism.

Two examples will serve. A recent study by Linda Nochlin takes up the question of Picasso’s color, an issue almost completely ignored by earlier scholar-



Pablo Picasso. The Scallop Shell (Notre avenir est dans l'air). 1912.

ship.¹⁵ Within modernist art, color would seem to be a subject set at the furthest possible remove from a reading by proper names. This turns out not to be true, as Nochlin analyzes a 1912 cubist painting that is mostly *grisaille*, broken by the intrusion of a flat plane broadly striped in red, white, and blue, and carrying the written words, “*Notre avenir est dans l'air.*” Conceived at about the same time as the famous first collage, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, the work in question echoes many other canvases from early 1912, in which the introduction of some kind of

15. Linda Nochlin, “Picasso’s Color: Schemes and Gambits,” *Art in America*, vol. 68, no. 10 (December 1980), 105–123; 177–183.

large plane which, like the chair-caning or the pamphlet “*Notre avenir . . .*,” is a wholly different color and texture from the monochrome faceting of analytic cubism, and inaugurates both the invention of collage and the opening of cubism to color.

This, however, is not Nochlin’s point. The actual red-white-and-blue *tricolore* pamphlet that Picasso depicted in this cubist still life had been issued originally to promote the development of aviation for military use. Thus the pamphlet “means” French nationalism; its colors bear the name of Picasso’s adopted country. Behind the *tricolore* we read not only “France” but the name of the artist’s assumed identity: “Picasso/Frenchman.” Color’s meaning contracts to the coding of a proper name. (Later in the same essay Nochlin reveals that behind Picasso’s use of violet in his work of the early ’30s there lies yet another name, which is its meaning: once again, Marie-Thérèse.)

Thus the significance of color reduces to a name, but then, in the following example, so does the significance of names. In his essay “Picasso and the Typography of Cubism,” Robert Rosenblum proposes to read the names printed on the labels introduced into cubist collage, and thus to identify the objects so labeled.¹⁶ In Picasso’s collages many newspapers are named: *L’Indépendant*, *Excelsior*, *Le Moniteur*, *L’Intransigeant*, *Le Quotidien du Midi*, *Le Figaro*; but none with such frequency as *Le Journal*. Rosenblum describes at length the way this name is fractured—most characteristically into JOU, JOUR, and URNAL—and the puns that are thereby released. But that the word-fragments perform these jokes while serving to label the object—the newspaper—with its name, is very much Rosenblum’s point. For he concludes his argument by declaring the realism of Picasso’s cubist collages, a realism that secures, through printed labels, the presence of the actual objects that constitute “the new imagery of the modern world.”¹⁷

This assumption that the fragmented word has the ultimate function of a proper name leads Rosenblum to the following kind of discussion:

Such Cubist conundrums are quite as common in the labelling of the bottles of Picasso’s compatriot, Juan Gris. On his café table tops, even humble bottles of Beaujolais can suddenly be transformed into verbal jokes. Often, the word BEAUJOLAIS is fragmented to a simple BEAU . . . in another example . . . he permits only the letters EAU to show on the label (originally *Beaujolais*, *Beaune*, or *Bordeaux*), and thereby performs his own Cubist version of The Miracle at Cana.¹⁸

We are to expand the word-fragment to grasp the name (we have our choice

16. Robert Rosenblum, “Picasso and the Typography of Cubism,” in *Picasso in Retrospect*, pp. 49–75.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

of three reds) and thereby to secure the original object. In this certainty about word-world connection there is realism indeed.

But are the labels EAU and JOU a set of transparent signifiers, the nick-names of a group of objects (the newspaper, the winebottle) whose real names (*Journal*, *Beaujolais*) form the basis for this labor of the cubist pun? Is the structure of cubist collage itself supportive of the semantic positivism that will allow it to be thus assimilated to the art history of the proper name? Or are the word-fragments that gather on the surfaces of Picasso's collages instead a function of a rather more exacting notion of reference, representation, and signification?

This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so.

—Robert Rauschenberg

The most recent major addition to the scholarly inquiry on cubism is Pierre Daix's catalogue raisonné, *Picasso: 1907–1916*. Daix's suggestive text expands the somewhat limited art-historical vocabulary for describing what transpires with the advent of collage, for Daix insists on characterizing collage-elements as signs—not simply in the loose way that had occurred earlier on in the Picasso literature—but in a way that announces its connection to structural linguistics.¹⁹

Daix is careful to subdivide the sign into signifier and signified—the first being the affixed collage-bit or element of schematic drawing itself; the second being the referent of this signifier: newspaper, bottle, violin.²⁰ Though this is rare in his discussion, Daix does occasionally indicate that the signified may not be an object at all but rather a free-floating property, like a texture—for example, wood, signified by a bit of wood-grained wallpaper—or a formal element such as verticality or roundness—although this element is usually shown to function as the property of an object: of the round, vertical winebottle, for example.²¹ Again and again Daix hammers away at the lesson that cubist collage exchanges the natural visual world of things for the artificial, codified language of signs.

But there is, nowhere in Daix's exposition, a rigorous presentation of the concept of the sign. Because of this, and the manner in which much of Daix's own discussion proceeds, it is extremely easy to convert the issue of the collage-sign into a question of semantics, that is, the sign's transparent connection to a given

19. Daix's relation to structuralism and an analysis of the sign is documented as being through Lévi-Strauss, to whom he refers at points throughout his text.

20. Because Daix seems, indeed, to equate the *signified* with the *referent*, he deviates in the most crucial way from Saussure's characterization of the signified as the *concept* or *idea* or *meaning* of the sign. Saussure is careful to distinguish between the concept evoked by the sign and any real-world, physical object to which the signifier could be attached as a label. It is to the former that the designation *signified* belongs. Daix, who never mentions Saussure's name, seems likewise unaware of the major import of Saussure's analysis.

21. See Pierre Daix, *Picasso: The Cubist Years 1907–1916*, New York, New York Graphic Society/Little, Brown, 1980, p. 123.

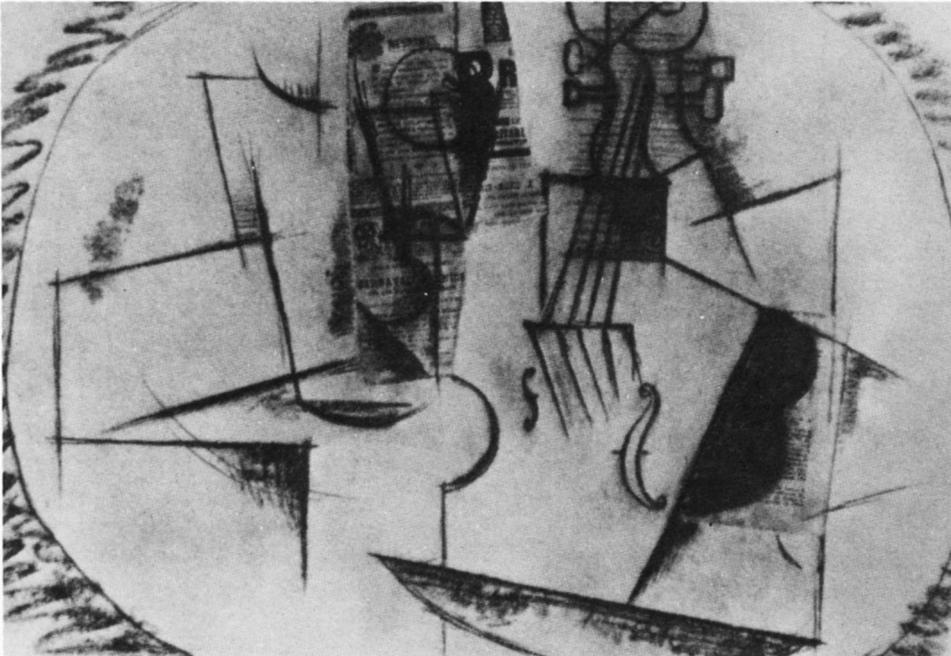
referent, thereby assimilating collage itself to a theater of the proper name: “EAU is really Beaujolais, and JOU is in fact Journal.”

If we are really going to turn to structural linguistics for instruction about the operation of the sign we must bear in mind the two absolute conditions posited by Saussure for the functioning of the linguistic sign. The first is the analysis of signs into a relationship between signifier and signified ($\frac{s}{\bar{s}}$) in which the signifier is a *material* constituent (written trace, phonic element) and the signified, an immaterial idea or concept. This opposition between the registers of the two halves of the sign stresses that status of the sign as substitute, proxy, stand-in, for an absent referent. It insists, that is, on the literal meaning of the prefix /re/ in the word *representation*, drawing attention to the way the sign works away from, or in the aftermath of, the thing to which it refers.

This grounding of the terms of representation on absence—the making of absence the very condition of the representability of the sign—alerts us to the way the notion of the sign-as-label is a perversion of the operations of the sign. For the label merely doubles an already material presence by giving it its name. But the sign, as a function of absence rather than presence, is a coupling of signifier and immaterial concept in relation to which (as in the Frege/Russell/Wittgenstein notion of the proper name) there may be no referent at all (and thus no *thing* on which to affix the label).

This structural condition of absence is essential to the operations of the sign within Picasso’s collage. As just one from among the myriad possible examples, we can think of the appearance of the two *f*-shaped violin soundholes that are inscribed on the surface of work after work from 1912–14. The semantic interpretation of these *fs* is that they simply signify the presence of the musical instrument; that is, they label a given plane of the collage-assembly with the term “violin.” But there is almost no case from among these collages in which the two *fs* mirror each other across the plane surface. Time and again their inscription involves a vast disparity between the two letters, one being bigger and often thicker than the other. With this simple, but very emphatic, size difference, Picasso composes the sign, not of violin, but of foreshortening: of the differential size within a single surface due to its rotation into depth. And because the inscription of the *fs* takes place within the collage assembly and thus on the most rigidly flattened and frontalized of planes, “depth” is thus written on the very place from which it is—within the presence of the collage—most absent. It is *this* experience of inscription that guarantees these forms the status of signs.

What Picasso does with these *fs* to compose a sign of space as the condition of physical rotation, he does with the application of newsprint to construct the sign of space as penetrable or transparent. It is the perceptual disintegration of the fine-type of the printed page into a sign for the broken color with which painting (from Rembrandt to Seurat) represents atmosphere, that Picasso continually exploits. In so doing, he inscribes transparency on the very element of the collage’s fabric that is most reified and opaque: its planes of newspaper.

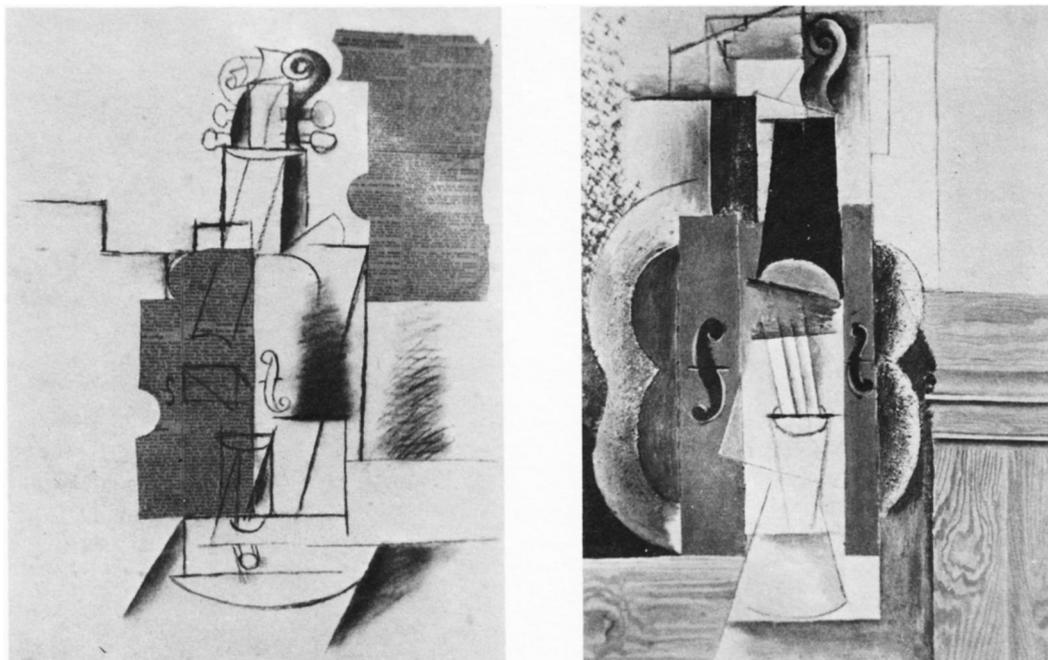


Pablo Picasso. Glass and Violin. 1912. (Daix cat. no. 529.)

If one of the formal strategies that develops from collage, first into synthetic and then into late cubism, is the insistence of figure/ground reversal and the continual transposition between negative and positive form, this formal resource derives from collage's command of the structure of signification: no positive sign without the eclipse or negation of its material referent. The extraordinary contribution of collage is that it is the first instance within the pictorial arts of anything like a systematic exploration of the conditions of representability entailed by the sign.

From this notion of absence as one of the preconditions of the sign, one can begin to see the objections to the kind of game that literalizes the labels of cubist collages, giving us the "real" name of the wine marked by EAU or the newspaper by JOUR. Because the use of word-fragments is not the sprinkling of nicknames on the surfaces of these works, but rather the marking of the name itself with that condition of incompleteness or absence which secures for the sign its status as representation.

The second of Saussure's conditions for the operation of the sign turns not so much on absence as on difference. "*In language there are only differences,*"

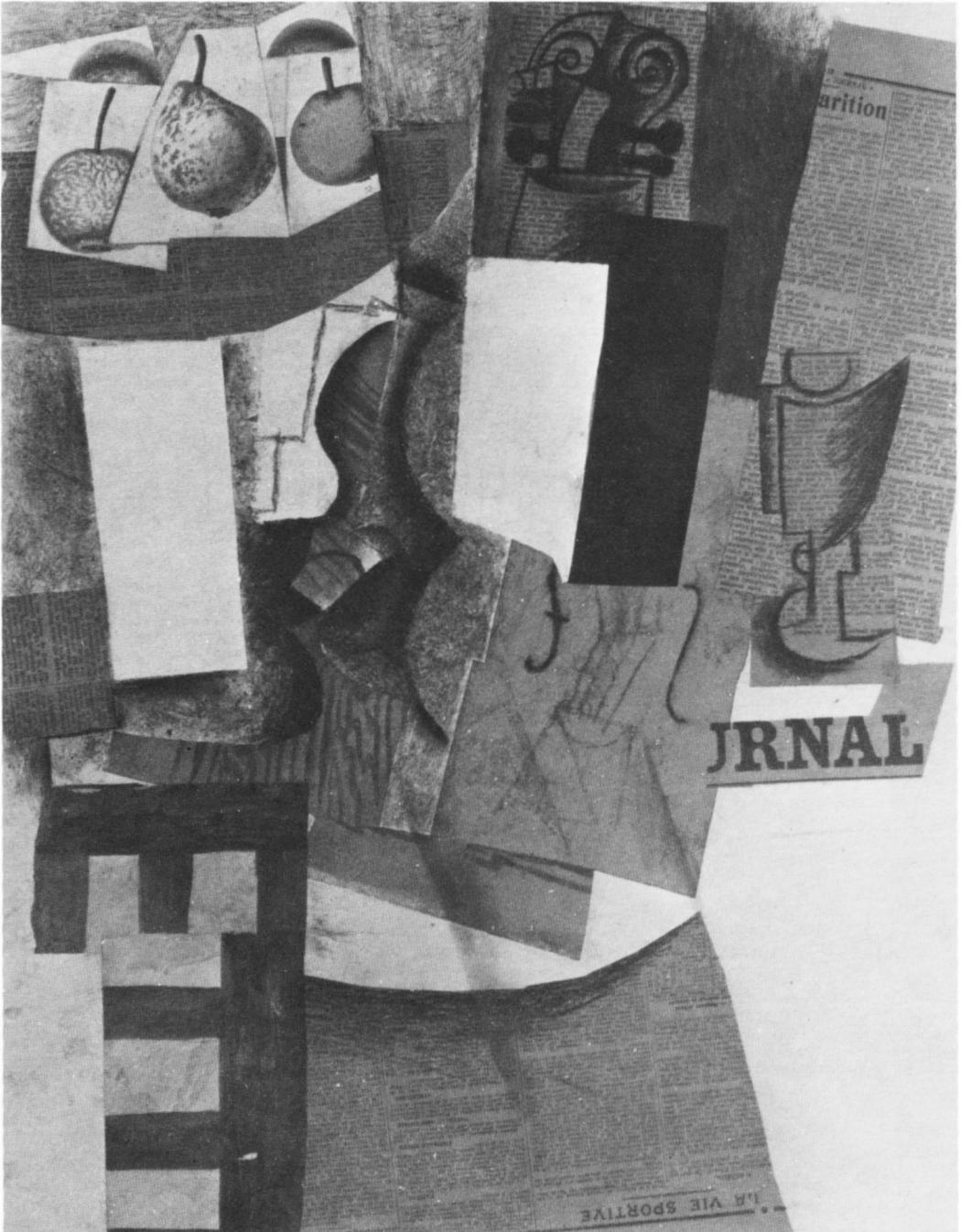


*Pablo Picasso. Violin. 1912. (Daix cat. no. 524.) (Left.)
Violin Hung on a Wall. 1913? (Daix cat. no. 573.)
(Right.)*

Saussure lectured. “Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*.”²² This declaration of the diacritical nature of the sign establishes it as a term whose meaning is never an absolute, but rather a choice from a set of possibilities, with meaning determined by the very terms *not* chosen. As a very simple illustration of meaning as this function of difference (rather than “positive identification”) we might think of the traffic-light system where red means “stop” only in relation to an alternative of green as “go.”

In analyzing the collage elements as a system of signs, we find not only the operations of absence but also the systematic play of difference. A single collage element can function simultaneously to compose the sign of atmosphere or luminosity and of closure or edge. In the 1913 *Violin and Fruit*, for example, a piece of newsprint, its fine type yielding the experience of tone, reads as “transparency” or “luminosity.” In the same work the single patch of wood-grained paper

22. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, New York, McGraw-Hill, p. 120.



Pablo Picasso. Compote Dish with Fruit, Violin, and Glass. 1912. (Daix cat. no. 530.)

ambiguously allocated to table and/or musical instrument composes the sign for open, as opposed to closed form. Yet the piece of wood graining terminates in a complex contour that produces the closed silhouette of a neighboring form. And the transparent colorism of the newsprint hardens into opaque line at the definitiveness of its edges. In the great, complex cubist collages, each element is fully diacritical, instantiating both line and color, closure and openness, plane and recession. Each signifier thus yields a matched pair of formal signifieds. Thus if the elements of cubist collage do establish sets of predicates, these are not limited to the properties of objects. They extend to the differential calculus at the very heart of the formal code of painting. What is systematized in collage is not so much the forms of a set of studio paraphernalia, but the very system of form.²³

That form cannot be separated from Picasso's meditation on the inner workings of the sign—at least as it operates within the pictorial field—is a function of the combined formal/significatory status of the most basic element of collage. For it is the affixing of the collage piece, one plane set down on another, that is the center of collage as a signifying system. That plane, glued to its support, enters the work as the literalization of depth, actually resting “in front of” or “on top of” the field or element it now partially obscures. But this very act of literalization opens up the field of collage to the play of representation. For the supporting ground that is obscured by the affixed plane resurfaces in a miniaturized facsimile in the collage element itself. The collage element obscures the master plane only to represent that plane in the form of a depiction. If the element is the literalization of figure against field, it is so as a figure of the field it must literally occlude.

The collage element as a discrete plane is a bounded figure; but as such it is a figure of a bounded field—a figure of the very bounded field which it enters the ensemble only to obscure. The field is thus constituted inside itself as a figure of its own absence, an index of a material presence now rendered literally invisible. The collage element performs the occultation of one field in order to introject the figure of a new field, but to introject it *as* figure—a surface that is the image of eradicated surface. It is this eradication of the original surface and the reconstitution of it through the figure of its own absence that is the master term of the entire condition of collage as a system of signifiers.

The various resources for the visual illusion of spatial presence becomes the ostentatious subject of the collage-signs. But in “writing” this presence, they guarantee its absence. Collage thus effects the representation of representation. This goes well beyond the analytic cubist dismemberment of illusion into its constituent elements. Because collage no longer retains these elements; it signifies or represents them.

What collage achieves, then, is a metalanguage of the visual. It can talk

23. This and the next six paragraphs are adopted from my “Re-Presenting Picasso,” *Art in America*, vol. 68, no. 10 (December 1980), 91-96.

about space without employing it; it can figure the figure through the constant superimposition of grounds; it can speak in turn of light and shade through the subterfuge of a written text. This capacity of “speaking about” depends on the ability of each collage element to function as the material signifier for a signified that is its opposite: a presence whose referent is an absent meaning, meaningful only in its absence. As a system, collage inaugurates a play of differences which is both about and sustained by an absent origin: the forced absence of the original plane by the superimposition of another plane, effacing the first in order to represent it. Collage’s very fullness of form is grounded in this forced impoverishment of the ground—a ground both supplemented and supplanted.

It is often said that the genius of collage, its modernist genius, is that it heightens—not diminishes—the viewer’s experience of the ground, the picture surface, the material support of the image; as never before, the ground—we are told—forces itself on our perception. But in collage, in fact, the ground is literally masked and riven. It enters our experience not as an object of perception, but as an object of discourse, of *representation*. Within the collage system all of the other perceptual *données* are transmuted into the absent objects of a group of signs.

It is here that we can see the opening of the rift between collage as system and modernism proper. For collage operates in direct opposition to modernism’s search for perceptual plenitude and unimpeachable self-presence. Modernism’s goal is to objectify the formal constituents of a given medium, making these, beginning with the very ground that is the origin of their existence, the objects of vision. Collage problematizes that goal, by setting up discourse in place of presence, a discourse founded on a buried origin, a discourse fueled by that absence. The nature of this discourse is that it leads ceaselessly through the maze of the polar alternatives of painting displayed as system. And this system is inaugurated through the loss of an origin that can never be objectified, but only represented.

The power of tradition can preserve no art in life that no longer is the expression of its time. One may also speak of a formal decay in art, that is, a death of the feeling for form. The significance of individual parts is no longer understood—likewise, the feeling for relationships.

—Heinrich Wölfflin

We are standing now on the threshold of a postmodernist art, an art of a fully problematized view of representation, in which to name (represent) an object may not necessarily be to call it forth, for there may be no (original) object. For this postmodernist notion of the originless play of the signifier we could use the term

simulacrum.²⁴ But the whole structure of postmodernism has its proto-history in those investigations of the representational system of absence that we can only now recognize as the contemporaneous alternative to modernism. Picasso's collage was an extraordinary example of this proto-history, along with Klee's pedagogical art of the 1920s in which representation is deliberately characterized as absence.

At the very same moment when Picasso's collage becomes especially pertinent to the general terms and conditions of postmodernism, we are witnessing the outbreak of an aesthetics of autobiography, what I have earlier called an art history of the proper name. That this maneuver of finding an exact (historical) referent for every pictorial sign, thereby fixing and limiting the play of meaning, should be questionable with regard to art in general is obvious. But that it should be applied to Picasso in particular is highly objectionable, and to collage—the very system inaugurated on the indeterminacy of the referent, and on absence—is grotesque. For it is collage that raises the investigation of the impersonal workings of pictorial form, begun in analytical cubism, onto another level: the *impersonal* operations of language that are the subject of collage.

In his discussion of classic collage, Daix repeatedly stresses the de-personalization of Picasso's drawing in these works, his use of preexistent, industrialized elements (which Daix goes so far as to call *readymade*), and his mechanization of the pictorial surfaces—in order to insist on the objective status of this art of language, this play of signs.²⁵ Language (in the Saussurian sense of *langue*) is what is at stake in Daix's reference to the readymade and the impersonal: that is, language as a synchronic repertory of terms into which each individual must assimilate himself, so that from the point of view of structure, a speaker does not so much speak, as he is spoken by, language. The linguistic structure of signs "speaks" Picasso's collages, and in the signs' burgeoning and transmuting play *sense* may transpire even in the absence of *reference*.

The aesthetics of the proper name involves more than a failure to come to terms with the structure of representation, although that failure at this particular juncture of history is an extremely serious one. The aesthetics of the proper name is erected specifically on the grave of form.²⁶

One of the pleasures of form—held at least for a moment at some distance from reference—is its openness to multiple imbrication in the work, and thus its hospitableness to polysemy. It was the new critics—that group of determined "formalists"—who gloried in the ambiguity and multiplicity of reference made available by the play of poetic form.

24. *Simulacrum* is a term used by both Jean Baudrillard and Guy de Bord.

25. Daix, *Picasso: The Cubist Years*, pp. 132-137.

26. The passage from Heinrich Wölfflin, cited at the beginning of this section, which faces the possibility of the "death of the feeling for form," is taken from Wölfflin's unpublished journals. For that passage, as for its translation, I am indebted to Joan Hart and her PhD dissertation *Heinrich Wölfflin*, University of California, Berkeley, 1981.

For the art historians of the proper name, form has become so devalued as a term (and suspect as an experience), that it simply cannot be a resource for meaning. Each of the studies on Picasso-via-the-proper-name begins by announcing the insufficiencies of an art history of style, of form. Because Rosenblum's essay on cubist typography was written a decade ago, it therefore opens by paying lip-service to the importance of a formal reading of cubism, modestly describing its own area of investigation as "a secondary aspect," a matter of "additional interpretations that would enrich, rather than deny, the formal ones."²⁷ But Rosenblum's simple semantics of the proper name does not enrich the forms of cubist collage; it depletes and impoverishes them. By giving everything a name, it strips each sign of its special modality of meaning: its capacity to represent the conditions of representation. The deprecation of the formal, the systematic, is now much more open in what Rosenblum has to say about method. "Certainly the formalist approach to the 19th century seems to me to have been exhausted a long time ago," he recently told two graduate-student interviewers. "It's just too boring . . . it's so stale that I can't mouth those words anymore."²⁸

This petulant "boredom" with form is emblematic of a dismissal that is widespread among historians as well as critics of art. With it has come a massive misreading of the processes of signification and a reduction of the visual sign to an insistent mouthing of proper names.

27. Rosenblum, p. 49.

28. In *The Rutgers Art Review*, I (January 1980), p. 73.