

THE HOPE OF AN ANONYMOUS ART: PICASSO, MALLARMÉ, PAPIER COLLÉ

Trevor Stark • Revoir Picasso's symposium • March 25th, 2015

In February 1935, Georges Braque joined a chorus of mostly chauvinistic voices to submit a “Testimony Against Gertrude Stein” for a special supplement of the journal *Transition*, denouncing her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. In contrast to other contributors such as Tristan Tzara, who heaped misogynist insults about Stein’s “literary kitchen” and “literary prostitution,” Braque objected to the “egocentric deformation” wrought by the ensnarement of Cubism within the (auto-)biographical mode.¹ While no doubt indignant at being classed by Stein as a mere “grenadier” to Pablo Picasso’s “Napoleon,” Braque nevertheless did not seek to assert his aesthetic parity with Picasso, but rather emphasized Cubism as a project to dissolve aesthetic subjectivity in itself: “In the early days of Cubism, Pablo Picasso and I were engaged in what we felt was a search for the anonymous personality. We were inclined to efface our own personalities in order to find originality.”²

In strikingly similar language, the other main players echoed this claim for Cubism as a collective effort to become anonymous. In his book *Juan Gris*, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the Cubists’ first dealer and most important advocate, wrote that Cubism entailed “a deliberate gesture toward *impersonal* authorship, arising out of a conviction that the painter’s ‘hand,’ his individual ‘handwriting,’ should not be visible in the finished product.”³ And, as Françoise Gilot recalls, Picasso explained Cubism in this way: “It was because we felt the temptation, the hope, of an anonymous art, not in its expression but in its point of departure. We were trying to set up a new order and it had to express itself through different individuals. Nobody needed to know that it was so-and-so who had done this or that painting.” The “laboratory research” of Cubism, he continued, was a short-lived “collective adventure.”⁴

The Cubist search for an impersonal and collective art, as Braque, Kahnweiler, and Picasso described it with rare unanimity, has broad implications at the level of artistic practice and aesthetic ideology, but this paper will focus narrowly on its relevance for reading Picasso’s *papiers collés*, or newspaper collages, of winter 1912. In doing so, I follow Kahnweiler’s suggestion, who maintained that the *papiers collés* exemplified Cubism’s “impersonal form of execution” by “replac[ing] the ‘hand-painted’ surface by the ‘ready-made.’”⁵ This paper broaches the anonymity of the *papiers collés* in three ways: first, by reframing the much-debated questions of what, how, or whether we are meant to read in these works materially made of newspaper text; second, by tracing the genealogy of the anonymous aesthetic to the poetic theory and practice formulated by Stéphane Mallarmé in the last decades of the 19th century; and third, by offering a demonstration of how Picasso chose his papers.



1. PABLO PICASSO

Man with a Hat and a Violin
1912

Cut and pasted newspaper, and charcoal, on two joined sheets of paper, 124,5 x 47,9 cm

Metropolitan Museum of Art
Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection
(1998.1999.363.64)

Image © Metropolitan Museum of Art
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By introducing a cacophony of newsprint language—from isolated letters to entire columns—cut from their contexts as well as from their initial authors, Picasso’s papers cast into doubt basic readerly questions, such as “who is speaking?” and “who is being addressed?” If the sheer profusion of authors and sources bars us from fully rooting the words in Picasso’s own convictions or thoughts, then their *readymade* nature, as Kahnweiler put it, causes us to further doubt whether they fulfil language’s communicative function at all, or in other words, whether they contain information intentionally transmitted from a singular author to us, their recipients.

And yet, generations of scholarship attest to the presence of textual moments in the *papiers collés* that seem to resonate with the voice and the life of Picasso himself. For example, the body of the violin with the two frontal f-holes in the Metropolitan Museum’s *Man with a Hat and Violin* (1912, Daix 535, fig. 1) is made up of an article concerning a certain “Mlle Léonie.”⁶ It’s hard to imagine Picasso reading this article, which he cut from *Le Journal*, without entertaining the memory of a character named “Léonie” in Max Jacob’s prose

poem of 1910, *Saint Matorel*, or at least thinking of Picasso's etchings of that character, which illustrated the book. If this reading seems implausibly rooted in the particular biography of its maker, one might instead pause on the allusive headline "La Cambriole" adjacent to the man's mouth, and read it as a canny commentary on the very procedure enacted by the work, in this case that of theft or appropriation.

The question is, at what order of magnitude do such readings simply cease to function? To take the most contentious example, if one doubts that the articles about the Balkan Wars that populate *Glass and Bottle of Suze* (1912, Daix 523, fig. 2) amount to a political *prise de position* from Picasso himself, then one may be willing, conversely, to read the headline "La dislocation," following Leo Steinberg, as a kind of label for the formal procedure enacted in the fractured glass next to it.⁷ I would then seem invited to analyze the text at an almost granular level: What about, for example, the fact that the edge of the dislocated glass reaches out onto the adjacent sheet to underline the word "jour," calling to mind the absent name of the newspaper from which the clippings were taken, *Le Journal*? And the fact that the zig-zag form near the bottom of the collage partially obscures a headline to precisely isolate the same word? If something happens once, we may be likely to dismiss it as coincidence; if it happens twice, this very repetition leads us to presume the existence of a guiding hand.



2. PABLO PICASSO
La bouteille de Suze (Bottle of Suze)
1912
Pasted papers, gouache, and charcoal, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4»
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis
University purchase, Kende Sale Fund, 1946
© 2016 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In these moments, however, the "hope of an anonymous art" seems to be left far behind, as we settle into a more comfortable univocality, in which Picasso's voice cuts clearly through the clamour provided we are sensitive enough to listen for him. To justify our own selection of certain words as glittering gems of intention, we implicitly imagine Picasso flipping through the newspaper and being struck by—or even searching for—these same words and, in a moment of creative plenitude, presenting them in the work *for us* to discover. I will argue, on the one hand, that we should recognize the role that wish fulfilment plays any time we read the papers *for* Picasso; and, on the other hand, that our feeling of doubt about the newspapers' meaningfulness is *in itself* one of the most profound aesthetic experiences staged by the *papiers collés*.

In fact, I propose that this was precisely the epistemological function of anonymity for Cubism, and that, furthermore, there exists a sophisticated model of the impersonal aesthetic, endogenous to the history and culture of Cubism, in the poetics of Mallarmé. Mallarmé summed up this principle with epochal clarity in his 1897 "critical poem," [*Crise de vers*]: "The pure work implies the elocutory disappearance of the poet, who cedes the initiative to words, through the clash of their mobilized inequalities."⁸

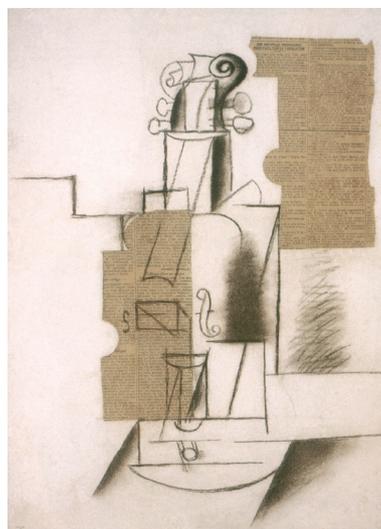
Before analyzing this model of "purity" as authorial disintegration, a few words should be said about the most detailed historical case made for Mallarmé's relevance to Cubism. Insightful comparisons between the aesthetics of Mallarmé and Cubism appear very early, with Ardengo Soffici linking the two in an essay of 1911, for example, and we know that he was a figure of considerable debate and fascination in Picasso's circle, especially among the poets Apollinaire and Max Jacob.⁹ However, it was not until the 1940s that Kahnweiler, the greatest early historian and theoretician of Cubism, made a case for Mallarmé's central importance to Cubism in his book *Juan Gris* and in a short essay entitled "Mallarmé et la peinture," published in a memorial issue of *Les Lettres* in 1948, and accompanied by a portrait of the poet by Picasso. In this latter text, Kahnweiler stated programmatically, "It was their reading of Mallarmé that gave to the Cubist painters the audacity to freely invent signs, with the conviction that these signs *would become*, sooner or later, the objects signified for spectators," and that "these signs would be 'read' [*lus*] in the end."¹⁰

Kahnweiler's concept of "reading" held a central role in his theory of art as early as 1912, but is not to be taken literally as referring to the words in the works, nor can it be assimilated to the Saussurean semiology of Cubism later developed by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois. It refers, rather, to an attenuated mode of aesthetic perception linked to Kahnweiler's persistent use of the conditional or future tenses: his conviction that the signs *would become* legible as intended, *would be read in the end*.¹¹ For Kahnweiler, the struggle of viewers to see anything at all in a Cubist painting could be overcome if they learned to translate non-mimetic pictorial signs into meaning via a complex cognitive and mnemonic process that was, he argued, comparable to reading. Mallarmé played a tactical role for Kahnweiler, then, because of the way his poetry's syntactical and semantic ambiguities delayed meaning extraction in order, as Mallarmé put it, to engage "the intelligence of the reader, which puts things into play itself."¹²

But for Kahnweiler, echoing a strain of Mallarmé criticism devoted to the paraphrase, the obscurity of a Cubist painting, like a poem by Mallarmé, was merely *apparent*, and once one had deciphered its fragmented signs, the reality of the object as intended by the artist would shine through, illuminated by the synthesizing productivity of the viewer's cognitive faculties. "The example of Mallarmé alone," Kahnweiler wrote, "could give [Picasso] the assurance that ... the spectator would rediscover the complete object which it was his intention to represent."¹³

However, Mallarmé consistently resisted precisely this model of reading and sought to mobilize the forces of the

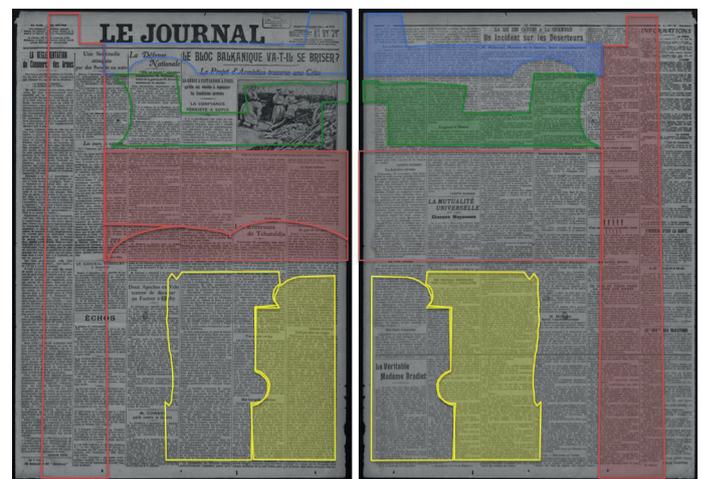
impersonal against it. In his prose work “Restricted Action” [*L’Action restreinte*] of 1895, to give but one example, he speculates on a utopian book that “entails no signatory;” “Impersonified, the volume, to the extent that one separates from it as author, does not demand a reader, either. As such, please note, among human accessories it takes place all by itself: made, being.”¹⁴ In brief, Mallarmé’s impersonality was a critique of instrumental communication, which treats language as a medium of exchange, with words like coins passed from an agent to a receiver with the intention of producing an effect. By contrast, encountering the balanced sonorous ambiguities in a sonnet by Mallarmé, the reader may suspect, first, that the author has excused himself from the responsibility of authorizing any one meaning over another, and, second, that the poem’s crystalline internal structure is indifferent to interpretation as such, and therefore does not demand a reader. In these moments of “vibratory suspense” [*suspens vibratoire*] as Mallarmé put it, language oscillated between its mute opacity and its signifying virtuality.¹⁵ If Mallarmé invites the reader to become aware of the flickering identity of *naître* [to be born] and *n’être* [to not be]—or of *Maître* [master] and *Mètre* [poetic meter]—it was only secondarily, he claimed, to convey images of mastery or birth, and primarily to render to language its innate “contingency” and “mobility.” To readers frustrated by the impression that words have simply ceased to function *for them*, Mallarmé retorted with disarming simplicity: “it’s just Language, playing.”¹⁶



3. PABLO PICASSO
Violin (Violin)
 1912
 Charcoal and pasted newspapers on paper,
 62 x 47 cm
 Musée national d'art moderne - Centre Pompidou,
 Paris
 Donation M. Henri Laugier 1963.
 AM 2914 D
 © Paris, RMN - Grand Palais / Droits réservés
 © Succession Picasso, 2016

Mallarmé’s desire to release a ludic principle within language at its most impersonal bears directly upon our initial question of “who is speaking” in the *papiers collés* and upon Picasso’s principle of selection for the newspaper collages. In *Man with a Violin and Hat*, Picasso made canny use of a single newspaper sheet, the front page of *Le Journal* from December 3rd, 1912, with an economical cut producing the double-curve carving out the man’s torso in negative space, and the polysemic shape in the lower half that echoes the man’s profile, ears, and the rather guitar-like contour of the violin. Further, the long strip running down the right side of the collage is

taken from the verso of this same front page, sharing an edge with the bottom of the torso piece. This reversal is perhaps less striking than the one in the Centre Pompidou’s *Violin* (1912, Daix 524, fig. 3) where the relationship of recto to verso is made evident to visual intuition through the interlocking pattern of the cut. However, the link between the two collages is more than a formal analogy: they are both physically made up of the same sheet of paper. The atmospheric sheet with the tantalizingly self-referential headline “UNE NOUVELLE ORDONNANCE POUR FACILITER LA CIRCULATION” [a new ordinance to facilitate circulation] is from the verso and its counterpart forming the body of the violin is from the recto: a single cut links the two sheets, which read as figure and ground, opacity and transparency, and another cut along their top edge runs parallel to the hip section of the Met collage. (fig. 4, see the diagram with the Met’s collage outlined in red and the Pompidou’s in yellow; the shaded sections are the ones visible in the collages).



4. *Le Journal*, December 3, 1912, pp. 1-2, with diagram of Picasso’s cuts by Trevor Stark

Picasso’s playful economization of the newspaper surface, however, extends even further. For the newspaper cut-out from the Metropolitan Museum’s *Bottle and Wine Glass on a Table* (1912, Daix 548), mentioning “anti-militarism,” is also taken from this same sheet’s verso and stood on its side (in blue on the diagram). So far, this leaves one major area of the page unaccounted for, a space featuring the words “*Exigences et illusions*”—enough to send the average Picasso scholar into an exegetical frenzy. This section found its way into a rarely reproduced collage from 1912, *Bottle and Guitar on a Table* (1912, Daix 550, in green). If we presume that the notched shapes of the two cut outs near the top of the page preserved the words *Le Journal* for use in another collage, then the entire sheet was used with very little remainder. The newspaper collages, and all the textual information that they contain, then, begin to seem less the result of Picasso’s careful “choice” than of his restricted action portioning out an indifferent field.

Indeed, Picasso’s use of the sheet as an a priori constraint casts doubt on the supposition that the mere appearance of



5. PABLO PICASSO
Bouteille, Journal, et Verre sur une table (Table with Bottle, Wineglass, and Newspaper)
1912
Charcoal, gouache, and pasted papers on paper, 62 x 48 cm
Musée national d'art moderne – Centre Pompidou, Paris
Donation M. Henri Laugier 1963. AM 2911 D
© Paris, RMN - Grand Palais / Droits réservés
© Succession Picasso, 2016

a newspaper cut-out implies an act of intentional selection by the artist that then authorizes a second act of selection by the reader, who chooses which words speak and which remain mute. At least for this rather important group of four works, this supposition would lead inexorably to the mythical notion that the entire front page of *Le Journal* from December 3rd, 1912, was infused with allusive meaning through the force of Picasso's artistic will—recto and verso.

The point is not that we should cease to think of Picasso's friend Max when we read "Mlle Léonie," of Picasso's politics when we read "anti-militarism," or of Picasso's procedures when we read "exigences et illusions." Instead, I am proposing that we hold to our experience of doubt about whether such meanings are mere accidents of chance; and, furthermore, that this doubt is not extrinsic to the significance of the *papiers collés*, or something to be overcome as Kahnweiler might have hoped, but a central part of their playful richness. In the *papiers collés*, Picasso radicalized the aesthetic of ambiguity at the heart of Cubism: no longer limited to the visual indecision between particular objects (between guitar and bottle, for example), they produce a vacillation between our desire to find meaning in the newsprint and the fact of its opaque impersonality. In this moment of "vibratory suspense" orchestrated by Picasso, interpretation itself becomes a perilous wager in which the role of chance can never be

abolished. As Mallarmé put it in the famous maxim at the end of his final poem *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira le Hasard*, "every thought is a throw of the dice" [*"toute pensée émet un coup de dés"*]. If one chooses to read the headline "Un Coup de Thé," in *Table with Bottle, Wineglass, and Newspaper* (1912, Daix 542, fig. 5) as a reference to Mallarmé's claim for the inextricability of chance in each act of human meaning-making, even this interpretation is rendered contingent by papers' uncertain semantic status.

Picasso and Mallarmé set their language games against a common enemy: not the newspaper as such, but the reification of language, the destruction of its mobile duality for the sake of communicative exchange. That Picasso shifted Mallarmé's utopian anonymous language to its actually existing social form in the generic speech of journalism and advertisement is one of the most dramatic historical inversions of 20th century art. By subtracting the newspaper once more from its social function, by subjecting it to a second degree of depersonalization, Picasso made it the stage for a "collective adventure," in our ever-renewed wager on the possibility of producing meaning together.

If we still must ask "who is speaking" in Picasso's *papiers collés*, I suggest that we turn to the words isolated from the newspaper as though in a comic speech bubble in Museum of Modern Art's *Head of a Man* (1913, Daix 592): "Je suis." It's just language playing, as though all by itself. In fact, were we willing to look closer, we would see that it actually says: "Je suis/général." I am general, anonymous, empty, and impersonal. But, then again, we may find meaning where we want it in the papers.

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1. Tzara, "Testimony Against Gertrude Stein," *Transition*, Feb 1935, p. 13; Braque in *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14

2. *Ibid.*

3. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris: His Life and Work*, trans. Douglas Cooper. New York: HN Abrams, 1946, p. 124

4. Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, *A Life with Picasso*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1964, pp. 75-77

5. Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris*, p. 124

6. References to Pierre Daix and Joan Rossetlet's catalogue raisonné of Picasso's Cubist work will be made parenthetically: (Daix #). Daix and Rossetlet, *Le Cubisme de Picasso*, Neuchâtel: Ides et Calendes, 1979.

7. See the discussion following David Cottington's essay "Cubism, Aestheticism, Modernism" in William Rubin, *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992, p. 78. I am tacitly referring to the debates between the

socially referential and semiological readings of the *papiers collés*, interpretive poles represented in the work of Patricia Leighton and Rosalind Krauss.

8. "L'œuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés." Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. 366, henceforth "OC." Mallarmé, "Crisis of Verse" in *Divagations*, Trans. Barbara Johnson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 208. Henceforth "BJD."

9. See Ardeno Soffici, "Picasso e Braque", *La Voce*, 24 August 1911: 635-37.

10. "C'est la lecture de Mallarmé qui donna aux peintres cubistes l'audace d'inventer librement des signes, avec la conviction que ces signes seraient tôt ou tard les objets signifiés pour les spectateurs... que ces signes seraient 'lus' finalement." Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "Mallarmé et la peinture," in *Confessions esthétiques*, Paris: Gallimard, 1963, pp. 218-219.

11. As early as his 1914 treatise, Kahnweiler wrote, "Seeing, or more precisely, reading [*das Lesen*] a painting is always a very complicated process. ... For the 'reading' of the image... the object 'seen' is not found on the canvas, but is produced by the one who looks..." Kahnweiler, *Der Gegenstand der Ästhetik*, München: H. Moos, 1971, p. 26.

12. "Ce Conte s'adresse à l'Intelligence du lecteur qui met les choses en scène, elle-même." See Mallarmé, "Igitur, ou la folie d'Elbehnon," in OC, p. 433.

13. Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris*, p. 129

14. BJD, p. 226; "le volume ne comporte aucun signataire" OC, p. 378. "Impersonnifié, le volume, autant qu'on s'en sépare comme auteur, ne réclame approche de lecteur. Tel, saché, entre les accessoires humains, il a lieu tout seul: fait, étant. Le sens enseveli se meut et dispose, en chœur, des feuillets." BJD, p. 219; OC, p. 372.

15. BJD, p. 235; OC, p. 386

16. *Ibid.*