

‘Picture = Rupture’:

Visual Experience, Form and Symptom according to Carl Einstein

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To shake up the figurative world is to call into question the guarantees of our existence. The naive person believes that the appearance of the human figure is the most trustworthy experience that a human being can have of himself; he dares not doubt this certainty, although he suspects the presence of inner experiences. He imagines that in contrast to this abyss of inner experience the immediate experience of his own body constitutes the most reliable biological unit.²

Form as operative violence: ‘Every precise form is an assassination of other versions’

It was in terms of *experience* – ‘inner experience’, indeed – that Carl Einstein formulated his basic understanding of visual objects. The analogy with Georges Bataille’s vocabulary is certainly striking – but not, on reflection, surprising. Firstly it has to do with that element common to all those maverick interwar thinkers who, following Nietzsche and Freud, shook to the core our ideas of the subject, the image and history (consider Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, Robert Musil). Above all, it has to do with Einstein’s committed participation in the *Documents* project, on which he worked diligently with Bataille and Michel Leiris in a ‘theoretical common front’ – against positivism and idealism, but also against André Breton’s surrealism, which was deemed a specious alternative to the givens of academic thought.

Einstein’s precise function at the centre of *Documents* remains obscure. It will probably take the publication of new archival material to redress the silence, the bad faith even, that has dogged his contribution to the theory of the Parisian avant-garde around the time of *Documents*. After Bataille and Leiris, Einstein signed the most articles in the magazine’s two-year run. From the first April 1929 issue onwards his name appeared among the members of the editorial committee, and he most likely played a full founding role in the project.³ In an unpublished note from 1954, Bataille would even speak of the ‘German poet Carl Einstein’ as ‘nominal director’ of the journal – ‘against’ whom, without specifying unduly, he recalled positioning himself; and yet clear analogies appear between their respective approaches in the domain of aesthetic critique.⁴

Of the three mavericks who decisively inflected *Documents’* direction, Carl Einstein was the oldest – forty-four in 1929, while Bataille was thirty-two and Leiris twenty-eight – and probably not the least maverick or recalcitrant. His reputation as an experimental writer had preceded him in France, since a couple of his texts, including an extract from *Bébuquin*, had been translated in literary reviews.⁵ Having already authored several violently erotic texts, he had been able to read Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* without blinking.⁶ In short he was, as Clara Malraux put it, ‘the man for



all the new approaches':⁷ he had read Freud in the original; he was able actively to introduce German ethnology to France; he possessed above all an incomparable knowledge of the history of art and the theoretical advances represented by the names Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl or Aby Warburg. The *Journal* of Michel Leiris bears witness to this fertile intersection, and even to the influence that Einstein's difficult, demanding mode of inquiry exercised on the two young refugees from surrealism.⁸

But how to qualify that *experience* whose theory Einstein elaborates in fragments from *Negerplastik*, or even the 'theoretical novel' *Bébuquin*, onwards? One answer can be found clearly stated at the beginning of his book, *The Art of the 20th Century*: commenting on the radical transformation of vision produced in the trajectory between impressionism and cubism, Einstein wrote of a 'collapse in the commerce of beauty'; on the ruins of this destruction, the visual object was then qualified as 'manifestation' (*Äußerung*), 'event' (*Ereignis*) and, finally, as 'symptom' (*Symptom*).⁹ Thus would experience be *symptom* – more precisely, the repercussion on the spectator, on thought in general, of forms emerging in the visible world as so many irruptions with the value of symptoms. A reading of the post-1926 texts, notably those written in 1929-1930 for *Documents*, up to *Georges Braque* (1934),¹⁰ should enable us better to discern the fundamental characteristics of this 'symptomal' understanding of visual experience.

The first of these characteristics is a dialectic of destruction, or, better, of *decomposition*. If the 'formalist' tone of *Negerplastik* can strike the contemporary reader, it would be disastrous to understand such a 'formalism' by the yardstick of art criticism today – where the term is almost always pejorative and almost always used in relation to the neo-Greenbergian debate. As strange as it might at first seem, Einstein identifies formal exigency strictly with form's exigency for decomposition. From 1912 onwards, Einstein announced that there might be no authentic *form* that is not at the same time violence – to be precise, *operative violence* [*violence opératoire*].¹¹ He always thought of form-work as the 'justified destruction of an object'.¹² In this way he introduced a dialectics (although asymmetric, hence his critique of 'lazy' dialectical dualisms in visual analysis)¹³ capable of restoring to the notion of form its basic 'traumatic' capacity:

Evidently art-making comprises many elements of cruelty and assassination. For every precise form is an assassination of other versions: mortal anguish cuts the current. More and more reality is decomposed, which makes it less and less obligatory; the dialectic of our existence is reinforced [...]: it is a traumatic accentuation.¹⁴

'Every precise form is an assassination of other versions': this admirable proposition states the dialectical character of all form-work, that is to say, of all decomposition of form by itself. Yet it seems dialectical on a further level, since it enunciates both the cruelty (in a perfectly Batailleian tone) and the transformational 'precision' of a 'version' by relation to its precedents



(and here Einstein's tone prefigures Lévi-Strauss). Moreover it is in perfect syntony with that which is most radical in the *Documents* project: in that the decomposition to which it pertains is primarily a *decomposition of the human figure*. This figure, writes Einstein in his 'Notes on Cubism', appears as the traditional aesthetic system's unity par excellence – thus par excellence as the unity to be 'compromised', to 'decompose'.¹⁵

This is why, in the context of the figurative arts of past centuries, Carl Einstein could bring his attention to bear on that precise – yet by his account cruel – *deformation* manifested by anamorphoses, in which he saw much more than a 'simple optical illusion': a disruption of vision in general, a modification of the site of the subject, a phenomenon inductive of 'ecstasy'.¹⁶ This is why Einstein could interest himself in Magnasco as *creatore della pittura di tocco e di macchia*.¹⁷ This is why the uniqueness of Hercules Seghers in Seventeenth-Century Dutch art seemed to Einstein so exemplary: not only did the dramatisation of thought and the model of the rebel obtain therein (Einstein's article begins by evoking an artist 'so poor that he had to make his paintings on his tablecloths and sheets', so desperate that he 'died drunk one night'),¹⁸ but, moreover, in Seghers's work the *decomposition of anthropocentric space*, of 'civilised' space, found an expression analysed by Einstein in somewhat disturbing (and again quite Bataille) terms:

It is a narrow, isolated revolt against everything that calls itself Dutch. For this attitude, Seghers paid with his life.

In his oeuvre, the organic continuity of Dutch art congeals into a kind of oppressive, petrified horror, or else it dissipates into a flight of planes that lacerate an eye wearied by flaccid, aimless parallels. Expansiveness, identified elsewhere with conquest, with hope, is here but a terrified escape. Everywhere the eye collides with densely crowded rocks, with piles of prisons. Such density betrays a despair that paralyses like a cramp, a kind of agoraphobia marks these etchings. Here we find a mournful contempt, a disgust with all sociability, a Holland against the grain [...].

The cliché *nature morte* has here recovered its naked meaning: nature grown rotten, petrified, nature as carcass. [...] Every rock, every leaf is isolated, asocial, decomposed, enclosed within itself. [...]

In these landscapes of a shredded baroque, planes have been ground up into tiny pieces. Of lava, of mud, of crumpled trees and pebbled screes. A desert sliced by roads traced out by meteors, an airless, congealed hell, without man or beast. Never mind that any living being would be a paradox in such a world. [...] Tortured paths leading the eye into the interior from which it is quickly expelled.

The eye is at once attracted and repelled. This technique is a zero technique, a dialectic of forms under the sign of death, a reciprocal destruction of parts. In this



instance, totality results not from one element augmenting the other, but from their mutual extirpation.

Seghers's nature is a rotted, petrified catastrophe. [...] These rocks form a distaff of writing in which one can disentangle the expression of an infantile dismemberment (witness the destruction of dolls), a joy in the definitive breaking up [*dissociation*] of parts. In sum, it is a question of the loss of the unified self and thus the appearance of a landscape signifies the destruction of the self.¹⁹

In the great classical century this spatial and subjective decomposition was only an *isolated symptom*. In cubism, in Einstein's view, it achieves the status of an irreversible *method*; then the symptom affects all vision, it becomes the *global symptom* of a civilisation which has turned space, time and the subject itself upside-down. With Picasso, Braque or Juan Gris, 'hallucination', as Einstein says, no longer cuts the real, but *creates the real*.²⁰ How so? By inventing an 'operative violence' specific to form, which requires a dynamic and dialectical redefinition of spatial experience. This redefinition is *dialectical* insofar as anthropomorphism is not excluded, but precisely decomposed; as with Juan Gris, where Einstein detects a 'tectonic' – a refusal of anthropocentrism – which is however made only out of 'human elements'.²¹

This would be cubism's most shattering value, according to Carl Einstein: this dialectical inclusion of the very thing it breaks down – that is to say, anthropomorphism. The *operative* aspect of cubist forms certainly creates a space of autonomous contatenations.²² But Einstein detests closed, non-dialectical autonomy; hence he considers Russian constructivism and *De Stijl* to be academic and static (what he harshly terms an 'accountancy of pure forms'), a formalism impoverished, according to him, because limited psychologically only to *Gestalt*-theory.²³ Forms cannot be shattered, says Einstein, without shattering the mind of the subject, which is why the Freudian metapsychological model – notably that of the death drive – is not absent from his theoretical exigency concerning form: there is no *operative* rigour without the *violence* of a basic 'assassination'. Cubist collage, a paragon of this subversive rigour, emerges as the disintegration of 'every optical prejudice', the 'most audacious and most violent attempt at the destruction of conventional reality'.²⁴

Form as movement and dissociation: 'Picture = rupture'

Here we touch on a second characteristic of visual experience according to Einstein: a dialectic of *mobility*, as formal as it is psychical. When Einstein repeats to Kahnweiler that cubism should not be considered a 'simple optical speciality', he elaborates his thinking by asserting: 'A valid experiment, it encompasses much more, and I believe that to understand it is only a question of energy [*es ist nur Frage unserer Energie*].'²⁵ Let us grant this phrase all the overtones of the energy motif: energy required of the spectator to grasp the extent of the cubist disruption; but also



psychical energy of which cubist forms are themselves the enactment. Here Einstein seems to me to go further in his formulation of the 'dialectical image' than the Benjaminian motifs of the image as 'dialectic at a standstill' or a 'constellation formed in a flash', for the formal analysis of cubist pictures permits the development, with relative precision, of a veritable *energetics of visual experience*.

In effect, if one attempts to comprehend cubist spatiality in its effects of simultaneity, of 'compressed movements', of 'planes that intersect', or of 'tectonic dissociations', one ends inexorably at what Einstein calls, in a play on words, *form-fields*.²⁶ Obviously conceived according to the model, borrowed from physics, of *force-fields*, these release their specific energy by an effect of dissociation that one might summarise as follows: whereas classical representation creates a continuous space in which objects and persons are arranged as discontinuous entities, cubism invents a discontinuous space 'which objects do not interrupt'. The relations between continuity and discontinuity, identity and difference, are here inverted – subverted – relative to the naturalist givens of traditional painting.

Now, what Einstein attacks in mimetic art is not so much the 'realist' attitude in itself. Rather, it is the *substantification of the real*, and the *immobilisation of forms*, and thus of forces, that he violently denounces, characterising Narcissus for example as a 'conceited naturalist', and Pygmalion as the poor 'dupe of a mannequin'.²⁷ At base, both seek only to fix the image. More generally, imitative realism is considered to be a 'sort of conglomerate of taboos and cowardly fears' that forever aim at an 'eternally real' of the represented – to which is opposed, in almost Deleuzian style, the 'naturalism in movement' of the nomad arts –, which renders humanist perspective a trivial 'little goal of traditional metaphysics'.²⁸

Renaissance man accentuated in his pictures the resultant *object*. By contrast, for his part, the cubist accentuates the elements of the *formation* of the object; in other words, he has done with the 'motif' qua independent factor.²⁹

Thus cubism is nothing other than a radical questioning – loaded with philosophical consequences – of the *substance* in which objects and humans had seen themselves 'fixed' by classical metaphysics. It consummates 'the end of the stable and determined subject', the 'liquidation of the anthropocentric attitude' and of a secular faith 'in that stupid gewgaw we call Man'.³⁰ It is thus *anti-humanist*, not through a taste for 'pure' or resolutely 'non-human' forms, but through a taking into consideration of the *symptomal* character of visual experience, necessitating recourse to a new *subject-position*. In effect, from the point of view of *visual* experience, space is never that extended continuum offered by the *visible* or optical apparatus of classical representation. The latter eternises Man, fixes space, fossilises objects in a single ideal continuum.³¹ In short, it represses all fear – or rather *anxiety* – in the face of the crumbling of time



and the subjective dissemination of space: and so it invents that metaphysical 'unshakeable lie' called the 'absolute'.³² Against this, cubism rediscovers the instability, the fundamental mobility of those 'mixed experiences' in which 'a disproportion between psychological processes and natural processes declares itself': it has understood and put to work that 'mobile psychological function' in relation to which space, the subject, or even vision, can never be substantiated.³³

A *form-field*, according to Einstein, is thus something wholly other than a simple 'aesthetic formula of style' supposed to restate the real or substance 'in another form'.³⁴ To invent a new form-field is to invent a *force-field* capable of 'creating the real', of 'determining a new reality by a new optical form'. A manner of saying that the picture – and primarily the cubist picture – does not have the job of representing, but of *being*, of *working* [travailler] (in the quasi-Freudian sense of the term, but also in the double sense of death-throes and birth-pangs).³⁵ This work [*travail*] only takes place in the incessant dialectic of a fecund *decomposition* and a *production* that never finds repose or fixes its end-point, precisely because its force resides in the anxious opening, the capacity for perpetual insurrection and self-decomposition, of form:

[...] images only retain their active force if one considers them as fragments dissolving themselves at the same time as they act, or rapidly decaying as do weak and mortal, living organisms. Images only possess a meaning if one considers them as sources of energy and intersections of decisive experiences. [...] Works of art only acquire their true meaning by dint of the insurrectionary force they contain.³⁶

To be sure, it is this play of 'insurrectionary' decomposition and the production of 'decisive experiences' that constitutes for Einstein the great force of cubism; which is no longer a stylistic variant in the history of art, but a more fundamental revision capable of 'determining a new reality through a new optical form', capable of 'radically modifying vision' in 'renewing the image of the world'.³⁷ Its power is linked to the fact that it does not hesitate to enact, at the very heart of its original 'tectonic', a third characteristic of visual experience: what I will term *dissociation*, a splitting of the gaze. This forms, at the centre of the aesthetic sphere, a principle of psychical negativity, an anxiety principle from which, however, the image draws all its power to shatter us, to affect thought itself.

We should understand, therefore, that Einstein's 'formalist' and 'energetic' approaches go together with a *metapsychological* point of view capable of apprehending the form-fields and force-fields proper to the image on an anthropological level comparable, for modern art, to that which *Negerplastik* had developed on the level of aura and cultic value. Schematising, one might say that the religious image *estranged* the subject, that humanist art *recentred* the subject, and that the modern image has finished by *dissociating* the subject, decentring without estranging it, or rather estranging it internally. Freud named this the unconscious, and Einstein – who also read



Jung, albeit to hijack [*détourner*] him – termed it the ‘fatal energies of the psyche’, the ‘fatal reality’ of the subject.³⁸

To speak of the unconscious is to speak of the scission of the subject. Carl Einstein ceaselessly sought to root out from aesthetics and art history the primacy of an ‘ego’ that he regularly described as ‘petit-bourgeois’.³⁹ He notably criticised the *Kunstwollen* of Riegl, which according to him ignored the hypothesis of the unconscious, and because ‘will presupposes conscious knowledge of a model that one attempts to imitate or attain.’⁴⁰ Not only does all modern ‘artistic production take place under the sign of a scission of the individual’,⁴¹ but henceforth images can no longer be considered as copies or reflections of whatever: they are only, affirms Einstein, ‘crossroads of [psychical] functions’, conforming to the anxious model – ‘active anxiety’, he specifies – of the chiasmus or the split.⁴²

To speak of scission of the subject is to speak of scission of representation, of *symptom in representation*. Against the Wölfflinian notion of artistic styles apprehended as ‘reflections’ of the ‘self-movement of the idea’, Einstein proposes the hypothesis of a *symptom-image*, an image that produces its objects not as ‘substances’ but as ‘labile and dependent symptoms of human activity.’⁴³ Not as aesthetic appropriations of substance, but as *disorders in substance* which foreground not the objectivised result of a representation, but ‘the complex and labile process of the subject-object’, a conflict of heterogeneous forces which render the picture a crossroads of ‘limit-states’ in movement.⁴⁴ This is to have done with the judgement of taste, that ‘idolatry’ of art as ontological accomplishment and the work as aesthetic bibelot:

One of the characteristics of this idolatry consisted in the fact that art historians concealed, or considered as historically insignificant, the ‘failed’ acts that determine the majority of artworks. The result was a rose-tinted, window-dressed selection, and perfection, the ‘jackpot’, was henceforth taken as the quotidian standard. We have recently indicated the opposite formula: in the artistic domain, the work of art properly called is in reality only an exception, a rarity, a monstrosity.⁴⁵

To have done with the judgement of taste? This is not to seek ugliness at any cost, to prize non-value cynically, to deprive form of rigour and construction – as the whole of cubist painting brilliantly proves. But it is, renouncing substances, to accede to the force-field of symptoms. It is to seek the ‘collapse’ of idealism’s cherished ‘repressions’; it is not to fear the analogy between a formal creation and a ‘mortal process’ or ‘anguish’; it is to render artworks ‘the depositories of forces’ by turns positive and negative, sexual and lethal; it is to regard the represented objects, not as reinforcements of certainty or eternity – as ‘still lives’ – but as ‘accents in the ensemble of becoming’; it is to open the image up to ‘efficacious shocks’ and ‘psychical trauma’; it is to render the work a *crystal of crisis*, something that arises in art history as



'abnormal'; it is to dare to produce the subversive advance of forms through a regressive attack of the formless.⁴⁶

For Einstein the *force-image* would be the image capable of breaking with the illusion of duration, the image capable of not being the end of a process or the fossil of a process, but the continuing anxiety of the process in action. 'We oscillate between murderous dynamics and ossifying fixation', one reads in *Georges Braque*.⁴⁷ A cubist painting, a Braque collage, are force-fields because they offer the *dialectical image* – the image simultaneously autonomous and unresolved – of murderous dynamism and ossifying fixation. Because dialectical, because unresolved, this image is therefore the *image-symptom* of a fundamental relationship (anthropological, metapsychological) of man to the world:

All classical art was stuck in its tenacious pride, in [...] that rigid faith in complete form and the solid objects – creations of God – that one humbly imitated.

Facing this order of things, the cubists asked: how can space become an *actual* field, a projection of our activity? Now, by itself this question put an end to all the guff of 'substances'. Space ceased to be a pre-established uniform condition, in order to become the central problem of invention. Once this attitude had been acquired, in turn all form ceased to represent anything other than a *symptom*, a phase of human activity, and the idealist superstition of a stable and immanent objective world was liquidated. Henceforth, it was no longer a matter of reproducing those objects, it was necessary to *create* them. [...]

In classical art, the unconscious and hallucination have been disdained as negligible qualities [...]. But now what mattered was to rediscover mysteriously felt forms, and to accentuate the dynamic centres of forces, instead of dissimulating them under the paraphrastic appearances of objects. [...] The decisive fact was not the advent, with cubism, of a new painting, but the transformation it wrought in the situation of man vis-à-vis the world. [...] The corrupt traditional solution saw itself replaced by an *actual* problematics, docile equilibrium by an active anxiety.⁴⁸

'Active anxiety' to 'rediscover mysteriously felt forms': this characterisation of cubism seems at least unexpected. And yet it draws on the strict consequences of the fact that, for Picasso and Braque, the *space-condition* – that is to say extended, a priori space – gives way to *space-problem*, which is not a soluble constructive equation, but a squaring of the circle, dare I say it, of inner experience and spatial experience. This is why the unconscious, and even hallucination, constitute an essential part of Einstein's vocabulary on cubism. The author of *Bébuquin* – who loved Miró and Giacometti, but loathed the flaccid mimeticism of Salvador Dalí –



had not waited for surrealism to advance a notion of 'psychical spatiality', of the *psychical sovereignty of forms* created in the 'active anxiety' of space.

One might say, to paraphrase a celebrated Cézannian formula,⁴⁹ that for Einstein form finds plenitude when hallucination attains abundance, or rather sovereignty. This is the case in cubism. Not only can the latter 'only prevail if it has been created from psychical equivalents', but even its very spatiality pertains to 'transforming the content of subjective experiences.'⁵⁰ This is most particularly the case in the painting of Picasso: his 'form-fields' go beyond all 'geometrical misunderstanding', his 'polyphonies of surfaces' go beyond all 'already-dead external appearance', his 'tectonic hallucination' goes beyond all spatial architecture:⁵¹

Picasso signals everything that in our era possesses freedom. He is the strongest argument against the mechanical normalisation of experiences. [...] Picasso finds himself situated at the heart of a violent conflict between direct human structure – or immediate reality – and already-dead external appearances. For him, art is an enormous and incessant enlargement of self-knowledge, which amounts to defining it as the dialectical negation of nature. [...] Every work endowed with a human value as an attempt at liberation isolates and destroys the real, all form being equivalent to distinction, separation, anxious negation. In this way the artist arrives not at the void and the generality of Hegel, but at the creation of concrete and autonomous visions. Picasso continually separates himself from himself and lives in a state of permanent transformation. One might say that the fundamental condition of his researches and discoveries is the dialectical destruction of reality. [...]

Picasso has understood that the death of reality is a necessary condition of the creation of an autonomous oeuvre, but on the other hand he intensifies it by projecting blocs full of imagination into it. He lays out what is psychically true, humanly immediate, and in this sense his realism is all the more powerful since his work is exempt from all naturalism. [...] For his fanatical abandonment to the visions that impose themselves on him [...], he compensates with the construction of forms. Against the fatality of the unconscious, he opposes a prodigious will of clearly intelligible figuration.

He knows no convenient peace of mind or constancy. His canvases are stretched between two psychological poles and in this regard one might speak of an inner dialectic, of a construction on many psychical planes.⁵²

In his book on Braque, Einstein finishes by stating this strange theorem: '*Picture = rupture*' [*tableau = coupure*].⁵³ How should we understand this? Firstly by recalling the phenomenological analysis of the *distance* that African fetishes, withdrawn into their auratic power, impose on the spectator. The cubist picture is 'rupture' in that it isolates itself from the



spectator, renouncing every psychological come-on [*oeillade*], every simulation of 'conversation' (as Einstein disgustedly said of the baroque *composti*). The cubist picture is 'rupture', which is why, after the death of God, it was able to reinvent the power of *beholding* its spectator – the opposite of the come-on – as it withdrew from every sphere of familiarity; thus it could reinvent and secularise the *aura*. But the picture could also be said to be rupture in itself, *dissociation* with itself: dissociation of each plane from each plane, dissociation of space and object, dissociation of the tectonic and the hallucinatory, internal dissociation of the time of the work.

Form as overdetermination and anachronism: 'blocs of a-causality'

Now, this dissociation anticipates a fourth characteristic of the visual experience theorised by Einstein, a fourth way, for form, of being *symptom*. I'll call it a dialectic of *overdetermination*, a Freudian term for the critique of determinism, a Freudian word for the *scission of causality*. When they rattle the 'always self-identical object', when they *open* it 'as one opens a box' or as a child breaks a watch, Einstein's cubists proceed, by that very gesture, towards an 'annihilation' of positive time (clock-time, positivist time, mundane time, metaphysical time).⁵⁴ Because they have 'shaken up the figurative world', the cubist painters have ended up calling 'into question the guarantees of existence' itself; thus 'spatial experience' is confronted, more manifestly than ever, in the crisis and symptom of 'inner experience'.⁵⁵ Because they have shaken up the grammar of styles and the markers of fixed space, they have overthrown time itself. As have they 'ultimately put causality seriously in doubt'.⁵⁶ They have reinvented the word *experience*, consequently reinventing 'the miracle without God', the 'explosion of logic', *a-causality*.⁵⁷

And if Einstein likes painters of the 'romantic generation' – his habitual nomenclature for those surrealists who interest him, principally Arp, Miró and Masson –⁵⁸ it is precisely because their preferred *temporal material* is that *a-causality* which renders the picture a 'distillation of dreams', and the energetic crossroads of a 'dissociation of consciousness'.⁵⁹ A propos of Masson, Einstein expresses the reversal of traditional values, the exigency of 'shaking up what is called reality', by introducing once more that dazzling phrase, *blocs of a-causality*, which in representation 'highlight the crisis', or outline the symptomal side, of visual experience:

The time seems to have come to identify the crisis, not to consolidate things as they gain stability, given that we are surrounded by idlers living off private incomes who placidly exploit outdated rebellions that have become innocent, surrounded by people who wish to live without being dead.

One thing really matters: to shake up what is called reality by the medium of unadapted hallucinations, in order to change hierarchies of values of the real. The hallucinatory forces make a breach in the order of mechanical processes; they introduce



blocs of 'a-causality' into that reality which has been absurdly presented as unified. The uninterrupted fabric of this reality is torn apart [...].⁶⁰

It is useful, I think, to locate this violent *artistic* claim in the same context that Einstein himself acknowledged, that is, an *epistemological* context. Because it modifies the subject's relation to space and time, cubist painting poses a problem of 'sensation' and knowledge. This explains the philosophical reference-point, at first sight surprising, that Einstein gives for his own essays in aesthetics:

It is about nothing less than a modification [...] of the means of considering objects and sensations. On the theoretical level, it is perhaps Mach who is closest to me.⁶¹

Why Mach? Why a philosopher of science, and why this one precisely? A reference to the psychology of William James would be more understandable, the influence of which on the cubists – via Gertrude Stein – is proven. But the theory of Ernst Mach presented for Einstein the inestimable advantage of situating itself directly at the level of fundamentals, in a debate with the great philosophical traditions where so many ideas on knowledge and art originated.⁶² Schematising, one might say that Einstein's interest in this theory was linked to four great critical elaborations that Mach had never ceased to develop and popularise in his works.

The first might be qualified as the *critique of transcendence*, and it is readily apparent how Mach's anti-Platonism and anti-Kantianism – he was the author of 'antimetaphysical prolegomenas' – might furnish Einstein with a basic conceptual toolkit.⁶³ The second was a *critique of subject-object duality*, with regard to which Mach refuted the Kantian idea of a priori space and time: for him, space-time was nothing other than a 'complex of sensations'; for him, the external object did not exist any more durably than the 'ego' of the knowing subject; it was necessary simply to envisage the relation between the two as a 'crossroads' of labile 'functions' generating a 'physico-psychical' articulation of reality.⁶⁴

The third Machian elaboration amounted to a *critique of the intemporality* of knowledge: it was founded on a simultaneously historical, energetic and economic conception of the development of science – a 'historico-critical epistemology' in which the supposedly intangible concepts of mechanics (for example the principle of the conservation of work) saw themselves rethought as the very effect of their historical constitution.⁶⁵ All of this effected a *critique of causality* that evidently fascinated Einstein. Mach practically reformulated Newtonian physics in *demythologising* it, in rethinking its entire methodological scope on the basis of a sort of psychical economy that he termed 'mental transformism' (*Gedankenumwandlung*).⁶⁶ In *The Analysis of Sensations*, Mach was already evoking the problem of causality and teleology in relation to complexes of spatial sensations.⁶⁷ And in his celebrated synthesis on *Knowledge and Error* –



translated into French in 1908 –, he wrote that ‘the means of understanding causality has varied in the course of time and can still be modified; there is no reason to believe that it is a matter of an innate notion.’⁶⁸

This ensemble of ‘historico-critical’ propositions was nothing less than an open door to the scientific and philosophical *modernity* of the twentieth century. In this sense, Mach was without doubt the last of the great nineteenth-century positivists, the positivist of the *ultimate crisis of positivism*. His principal critics at first presented themselves as his disciples – and it is notable that they were, in their various fields, the very founders of contemporary thought. In 1909 Albert Einstein declared himself a ‘pupil of Mach’ and understood the Machian critique of Newtonian physics as an epistemological and historical justification of his own theory of relativity. Again, in 1911 Sigmund Freud signed a manifesto in favour of Mach’s principles; he had admired the work carried out by the German philosopher on the desubstantialisation of the ego – Mach had written that ‘the ego is irrecoverable’ (*Das Ich ist unrettbar*).⁶⁹ We know that Lenin made Mach’s ‘empiriocriticism’ the privileged centre of his materialist critique of knowledge.⁷⁰

Even Musil wrote a 1908 philosophy thesis in which he sought directly to confront the doctrine of Ernst Mach.⁷¹ A propos of that thesis, Paul-Laurent Assoun has shown the prominent role that the Machian critique of substance played in Musil’s formation of a ‘philosophy without qualities’.⁷² But to this well-known theoretical picture (Albert Einstein, Freud, Lenin), to this major literary corollary (Musil), must henceforth be added Carl Einstein and his ‘visual critique without concessions’. He too had understood that it was necessary, in the domain of aesthetics and art history, to ‘highlight the crisis’ opened up by Ernst Mach in the positivist regime of knowledge, and to invent, at the very heart of this crisis, a new notion of experience. He too should be counted among the ‘demolishers of substance’ in the first decades of the century, he too – though he has remained unnoticed – counts among the founders of our contemporary thought.

But Carl Einstein occupied that difficult position of being at once a *modern thinker* and a *critical thinker of modernity* (a conjunction that enters into Walter Benjamin’s definition of the dialectical image). Demanding a modernity without dogmatism (he would probably have refuted the ‘modernism’ of American art critics), he nonetheless demanded an unwavering and uncompromising modernity (he would probably have loathed the ‘postmodernism’ of a certain sort of art criticism today). Thus thinking the image, and thinking modernity, constituted for him two conjoint reasons to ‘highlight the crisis’ and to accentuate, as a consequence, one final symptomatic characteristic of visual experience: for the dissociation of the gaze and the dissociation of causality could not go without a *scission of time* itself. The image, in its most radical definition, became the sensible crossroads of that scission itself: a symptom, a *crisis of time*.

Now thinking such a ‘crisis’ in the context of modernity amounted to Carl Einstein rediscovering – though in an inverted form – the theoretical intuition already realised in



Negerplastik: the 'scission of time' is another way of describing the dialectical image, it is only another version, which can without doubt be generalised in the history of art, of the *dialectic of anachronism*. In *Negerplastik*, the dialectical pivot [*cheville dialectique*] of *modernity* (from the cubist viewpoint) enabled understanding of an 'immemorial' art to expand, for the reason that the latter as yet had no history. In *The Art of the Twentieth Century* – and in the later texts written for *Documents*, up until *Georges Braque* – it is the dialectical pivot of a sort of *prehistoricity* that enables increased understanding of an art which also (but by the symmetrical reason of excessive 'novelty') still awaits its history. Thus for Einstein the constitution of a history of contemporary art often involves an acute focus on the phenomena of 'regression', 'archaism', 'primitivity', or 'survival' in the Warburgian sense of the term. It would be better henceforth to speak of *modern anachronism* rather than 'primitivism': the latter remains a matter of taste (a trivial aesthetic model), even of influence (a trivial historical model); whereas the former produces a dialectical and differential understanding of artistic modernity.

Therefore, in his 'Notes on cubism', Einstein relates the 'murderous force of the artwork' – vis-à-vis an assassinated reality, a pulverised 'identity of objects' – to the sudden interest of the cubist painters in 'archaic, mythic and tectonic epochs'. Far from constituting a retreat towards the chrysalis of the archetype (which to Einstein's eye appears as the 'negative side of the taste for the primitives'), this relation puts at stake nothing other than the complication, the rethinking, of the history of painting itself; the test of anachronism plays here as proof that 'history is not unitary'.⁷³ With regard to Braque, Einstein would write the same: 'The picture is "primitivised", but that is unavoidable'⁷⁴ – a precise way of saying that it is insufficient. Certainly Braque abandons himself to some 'regressions to primitivism' and 'violent hallucinatory states', but he does it not to abandon himself therein: he constructs, he recomposes an absolutely new space-time, and Carl Einstein therefore specifies that we must speak of these primitivisms 'in order to underline the complete independence of Braque in this respect.'⁷⁵

With Miró too, Einstein writes, 'the end rejoins the beginning'; but this 'prehistoric simplicity' has nothing to do with a return to the caves or noble savages; on the contrary, it assumes the high dialectical function of collapsing the 'anecdotal acrobatics' of bourgeois art, and above all consummating the 'defeat of virtuosity' – for, according to Einstein, this is how to *begin to be modern*.⁷⁶ André Masson's 'ecstatic procedures' or 'mythic reactions' do not attend a nostalgic return to shamanic or mystical practices. In actuality they are deployed as dialectical triggers for a virulent anti-humanism that seeks to generate a decidedly atheological 'eclipsed ego'.⁷⁷ Finally, for Arp, the 'rites of a prehistoric childhood' are only mimed to produce, on the one hand, a 'traumatic accentuation' of forms – a perfectly *modern* necessity in the age of aesthetic politeness and the judgement of taste –, and on the other hand, that *humour* which makes of the 'primitive' an *alibi*, that is to say an uninterrupted strategy of displacement, which strips archaism of any sense of security or the homely:



In his works Arp repeats the rites of a prehistoric childhood. [...] Arp cooks, cuts up, carves out: necks bound with a tender tie; birds fighting in an egg; doll and moustache, etc. According to negro beliefs, a part signifies as much as if not more than the whole; since a more far-reaching condition is concentrated in the fragment, without which the magic forces would be dispersed in the accessories. This is an ecstatic isolation. By decapitation and dismemberment, one isolates that which is decisive: concentrated possession and sadism.

Thus children demolish their dolls, cars and horses, hide an ear under the pillow, with a lock of hair, a ribbon and a horse's leg, or sleep, desiring an oracle, on the hemp entrails of a monkey that they exorcise and conjure nightly.

A virile and vain moustache (traumatic memory of the era of Wilhelm II) wraps itself concupiscently around a woman's torso. Leaves cover navels which are sometimes eyes. A bird's egg is aureola and mother simultaneously and the latter is broken by a schizophrenic kick. The detail is worth as much as the whole; it is even more intense and sharp: it is a traumatic accentuation. [...]

Every theme provokes its contrary and slides insensibly towards it. Thus pictures decompose themselves psychically beyond form. In the opposite case, what boredom! It is true that before such a dialectic one often seeks refuge in the infantile primitives, but these efforts are in vain. All the forms are ambiguous, allowing the romantic to take from them a multiple humour.⁷⁸

As opposed to these more or less explicitly corrosive dialectics, we should recall that Einstein perceived in a certain surrealist practice that 'avant-garde of the salon' which he analyses, in a text on collage, along two complementary lines of attack: on the one hand, the collage-pun seems to him to forego cubism's *processual* violences, which find themselves henceforth 'recuperated' in a self-satisfied iconographism of the subconscious; on the other hand, the psychoanalytic vogue seems to him to give up the *anthropological* violence of the Freudian project, which is similarly 'recuperated' in a new capitalisation of the Ego – an analysis which I think would require little adjustment to apply to a good portion of today's contemporary art scene:

There was a time when *papiers collés* played the destructive role of acids. That time's long gone! Back then an attempt was made to break with a cocksure craft full to bursting with confident artifice. [...] At that moment collages were but a means of defence against the fortunes of virtuosity. It is only today that they have degenerated into facile puns, that they are threatened with lapsing into the trumpery of a petit-bourgeois decor. [...] [A]ll the same this Dalí seems to me to be a virtuoso only in post-card forget-me-nots that he



employs as a collective base. Consciously the most facile language is chosen; Dalí puts academic media to work, which have the effect of exhausted paradoxes. [...]

There are some gentlemen who believe it possible to protest seriously against one logic – a means of oppression – with another logic, or against some pictures with other pictures. This is only a substitution of fetishes. It is certain that precious and individual writing, the medium of charming bastards, was combated with the help of collages, as was that threadbare Pantaloon, the old Ego! [...] But the Ego reappears when the action dies down: it is the lifebelt amid the memories of continuity. The Ego is equivalent to a psychical capitalisation, a trust fund of sorts.

Aragon tells us of the black magic we encounter everywhere, as common as the Laughing Cow [...], a minor scandal that causes neither the rubber dolls of reader nor spectator to rise up; rather, they are enchanted by this devilish *pompier*-ism.

I'm surprised that music-halls aren't yet offering psychoanalytic playbills. Things haven't got vulgar enough.⁷⁹

Make no mistake: these virulent *ad hominem* critiques, these case-by-case analyses, are something quite other than witty journalese or simple judgements of taste. Their very virulence is articulated for a precise, elaborated, *dialectical* theoretical purpose. They aim to construct a new conception of the *image-time* relation, which is another way of saying that they trace the contours – or rather the streaks – of that *flash of the image* which Benjamin, contemporaneous with Einstein, isolated in the notion of the dialectical image.⁸⁰

Form as dialectic and destiny: 'Seeing means setting still-invisible reality in motion'

What temporal concretion do we form when we are engaged in the act of looking, in visual experience? Of which temporal concretion does the image at that moment make us a gift? Firstly, a very strange kind of *present*: this is not the present of 'presence' – if by that one means the presence of classical metaphysics rightly called into question by Derrida –⁸¹ but the present of *presentation*, which imposes itself before us with greater sovereignty than representational recognition itself (thus, when we confront Picasso's *Portrait of Ambroise Vollard*, it is not Ambroise Vollard who is primarily 'present', but a pictorial space so specific that it *reproblematizes* the whole question of anthropomorphic representation). Now, to speak of *presentation* – as one speaks of *formation* – is to speak of process, and not stasis. In this process, *memory* crystallises visually (for example in the history of the portrait genre until Picasso overthrew it) and, in crystallising, it diffracts, sets itself in motion, in short in *protension*: it accompanies the process and, so doing, produces the future contained in the continuation of the process (for example, after Picasso we are obliged to modify what we *expect* from all anthropomorphic representation). In visual experience envisaged in this way, there is therefore a



crystal of time which simultaneously engages every dimension of what Benjamin termed 'dialectic at a standstill' – 'that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.'⁸²

Carl Einstein's vocabulary is hardly any different. In his *Georges Braque* one reads that the historical and ontological condition of man '*oscillates* between creation and adaptation, mortal temerity and security'; two lines later, the *image* already reveals its condition as a temporal crystal: in it, writes Einstein, history 'spouts from the living present to flow back towards the vanished past. It *scintillates* like a simple projection of the *present* moment. The selection and appreciation of lost times [a fundamental problem of the discipline of history] are determined and formed by the structure and power of the *present*. It cannot, therefore, be a question of singular, objective history; on the contrary, all historical crystallisation is a perspective constructed along the sightline of the present.'⁸³

Thus art history as a discipline should itself *oscillate* and *scintillate*, if it does not wish to lose sight of the temporal complexity of artworks. This complexity is constituted primarily by *destructive* and agonistic *processes* which make 'a genuine combat' of all visual experience, inasmuch as every form is the concerted assassination of other forms, and also inasmuch as, by its force-field, 'the action of the artwork consists in the destruction of the beholder' – at least the destruction of his prior 'points of view'.⁸⁴ On the other hand, the experience Einstein is addressing supposes a register of *regressive processes* which justify the role of 'primitivism' – or, in a more general sense, anachronism – as a dialectical pivot in formal invention, in novelty itself. This requires that 'regression' be on the side of the *constructive processes* of form,⁸⁵ processes no longer defined as 'progressivist' or linked to some metaphysic of creation, but henceforth understood as dialectical, that is to say *transformative*. Thus Einstein's defence of 'realism' ought not to be conceived as an engagement with a certain *style* of representation, but as the defence of a certain type of *metamorphic* process capable, as he often put it, of 'creating the real':

The fundamental error of classical realism seems to reside in the fact that it identified vision with perception, that is to say that it denied it its essential force of metamorphic creation. This positivist attitude narrowed the creative range of vision, just as it diminished the extent of the real. It was a pre-established taboo and vision was limited to passive observation. Now, this positivist conception only embraced a minimum of reality: the visionary world was beyond it, and the secret structures of processes appeared unimportant to it. All perception is only a psychological fragment. But against this tendency of patient adaptation is opposed the passion for annihilating conventional reality, the frenzy for expanding the real. [...] True realism seeks to speak not of *imitation*, but *creation* of objects. [...] A burgeoning reality will displace the old, rigid reality. Reality no longer signifies tautological repetition.⁸⁶



Ultimately, a very simple – yet demanding – conclusion imposes itself on the present: *to see* only signifies *to perceive* in the field of trivial experiences, or rather the field of trivial conceptions of experience. If we want to *perform vision* (in artistic activity), if we want to *think vision* (in critical activity), then we ought to demand much more: we should require *vision* to assassinate *perception*, if we mean by that word what Einstein means here – a ‘passive observation’ of ‘tautological reality’. We should demand that *vision* enlarges *perception*, opening it literally ‘as one opens a box’, according to the expression already cited with regard to cubist space. But, to reiterate, we must understand this opening *temporally*: *to open vision* means paying attention – an attention which is not self-evident, which requires mental labour, permanent reinterrogation, constantly renewed problematisation – to the *anticipatory processes of the image*. These are probably, in Einstein’s eyes, the most fundamental, the most ethically and epistemologically necessary processes of every authentic image. To reiterate, they signal the particular importance of cubism in the culture – in the *vision* – of the twentieth century:

Then came the lightning-flash of cubism. At last it happened that some men wanted something other than to be limited to *painting* and confirming an aged world. [...] Without doubt these painters were scarcely aware of the transformation which was taking place in other domains. But what matters is that these men, possessed by a future reality, saw themselves reflected in their work. [...]

It had been forgotten that space was only a labile intersection between man and the universe. Now, vision only has human meaning if it activates the universe and casts its turmoil therein. Visual divination is equivalent to action, and seeing means setting *still-invisible reality* in motion. [...]

Art has too often been considered an attempt to organise the given image of the universe; for our part, art represents above all a medium that permits rendering visible the poetic, augmenting the mass of figures and the *disorder* of the concrete, and consequently increasing non-sense and the inexplicable in existence. It is precisely in destroying the continuity of becoming that we acquire a slight chance of freedom. In a word, we underline the value of that which is not yet visible, of that which is not yet known.⁸⁷

Einstein speaks to us here of a *vision* which is not a faculty, but exigency, work: it rejects the *visible* (that is to say the already visible) and demands the oscillation of the *visual*; it rejects the action of the *voyeur* and demands that of the *seer*. This is the ultimate mode of comprehending the *symptom-image*: what is a symptom, in effect, if not the unexpected, unfamiliar sign, often intense and always disruptive, which *visually* declares something *which is not yet visible*,



something we do not yet know? If the image is a symptom – in the critical rather than the clinical sense of the term –, if the image is a discontent in representation, it is in that it indicates a future of representation, a future that we know not yet how to read, nor even describe. In this sense the notion of the image reconnects with an ‘ancient prophetic power’ which liberates the ‘future real’ in the ‘dissolution of conventional reality.’⁸⁸ But it is only an image – wherein lies its fragility, its gratuitousness, yet also its pure effect of disinterested truth: in this sense it can avoid the dogmatism of religious or ideological types of prophecy. The image is a potential future, but it is not messianic. It is only, says Einstein, a ‘hallucinatory interval’: it ‘irrationalises the world’, realises only what it ‘urges’, and that is why Einstein wished, in these very lines, to set himself apart from all sociologism (the image as ‘cultural symptom’, as it was apprehended by Panofsky, and still is today)⁸⁹ as he did from all Marxist ‘prediction’.⁹⁰ To be sure imagery – iconography – delivers messages, so-called ‘signs of the times’. But the image scrambles the messages, delivers symptoms, delivers us over to the still-elusive. Because it is dialectical and inventive; because it *opens time*.

So what is it that *opens* and announces itself in this augural aspect of the image? Action no more than knowledge, to be sure: cubism neither motivates nor translates the Russian Revolution or the theory of general relativity. For Carl Einstein, what opens itself in the image, what the image takes its power of ‘being not yet visible’ from, proceeds from an intermediate zone between dream and waking – according to a new analogy with the category of ‘reawakening’ used by Walter Benjamin to describe the dialectical image.⁹¹ Therefore, what is opened in this ‘reawakening’ of the image remains in the order of a non-knowledge: the symptom-image is above all a *destiny-image*, in the metapsychological sense of the term. For Einstein it hovers at the edge between a repression and its lifting: it is a *transition*, a pivot of transformations. As in the case of Bataille, it should be thought through the sovereignty and potential exuberance – for knowledge [*connaissance*] as for action – of non-knowledge [*non-savoir*]. It thus requires that its unconscious dynamism be formulated beyond the trivial models of solely temporal retrogression: because it is a *dialectical image*, it must relentlessly combine ‘regression’ and ‘progression’, ‘survival’ and ‘novelty’.⁹²

At this level Einstein’s great epistemological bravery consists in implicating the discourse of art history itself in the very fragile force of the augural ‘reawakening’. What use is art history? Not a lot, if it contents itself with neatly classifying objects that are already known, already recognised. Plenty, if it manages to pose *non-knowledge* at the centre of its problematic and to make of this problematic the anticipation, the *opening of a new knowledge*, a new form of knowing, if not of action. Therein lies the greatness of Carl Einstein in the history of the discipline: he was not better than others at classifying or interpreting objects already integrated into the corpus of history; he *invented objects*, and in so doing anticipated new forms of knowing about art – and not only African and twentieth-century art.



This courage, this risk certainly involve a trade-off: the unrealised, unfinished, multifocal, even shattered – in the manner of a broken montage – character of his adventure in knowledge.⁹³ 'I am not speaking in a systematic fashion', Einstein wrote to his friend Kahnweiler in 1923.⁹⁴ An admission of fragility, but also a claim, against any spirit of system, of a certain relation between concept and image: to grasp the image with the aid of the concept (an axiomatic attitude) is to understand half of the image at best – and the half that is most dead. What Einstein demanded from art history was rather to make the image play or 'work' (a heuristic attitude) *in preparation for unsuspected concepts*, unprecedented logics. He had already written as much in 1912, in the angles of broken writing that diffract his novel *Bébuquin*:

And what if logic ever abandoned us? But at what point does it intervene? We know neither one nor the other. There's the crux, dear boy. [...] He told himself that logic was as bad as those painters who represent virtue as a blonde woman. [...] [A] hall of deforming mirrors is more conducive to meditation than the propositions of fifteen professors. [...] Don't let yourself be fooled by those incompetent philosophers, who only blather incessantly about unity, relations between parts and their combinations, of which they would make a whole. [...] Remember this. [Kant's] seductive importance lies in having established the balance between the object and the subject. But he forgot one essential element: namely, what the subject does when it is working [...]. This is the crux and the reason why German idealism has been able to exaggerate the role of Kant to such an extent. Non-creators are always exhausted by the impossible.⁹⁵

This, therefore, is the task Carl Einstein assigned the art historian: not to be exhausted, not to shirk the impossible, not to forget to create new forms of knowledge in contact with new forms of art. *To be bound to the impossible* and to make this link a demand of thought, even of method, that is to say a demand of *gaya scienza*. Bataille is known for using similar language. But the double aspect of this challenge – a challenge to knowledge and action – finds particular expression in Einstein's case. Already in *Bébuquin* its hero was saying: 'The concept wishes to go towards things and I, I want exactly the opposite. You know now that my telos should be considered almost tragic.'⁹⁶ Einstein's plainly was, insofar as he never renounced the demand, nor the impossible.

When he wrote to Kahnweiler that 'I am not speaking in a systematic fashion', Einstein at once specified: 'Simply because I cannot give myself the luxury of thinking about such [exclusively theoretical] things, in the middle of all this continuously unfolding daily catastrophe.'⁹⁷ That is to say, the catastrophe of history, history with a big H: of which the historians are victims like all the others. But the historian-victims of History – like Carl Einstein, Walter Benjamin, Marc Bloch – are peculiar in knowing a little more keenly what they are the victims of. A knowledge



which offered so little reassurance that Carl Einstein killed himself in 1940 – as would Benjamin soon after – to escape the catastrophe closing in on him.⁹⁸

Three years beforehand, without even telling his numerous literary and artistic acquaintances, Einstein had tried to counteract the catastrophe by enlisting with the anarcho-syndicalists in the Spanish civil war.⁹⁹ The letters he addressed to Kahnweiler during this period are at once harrowing and possessed of an absolute theoretical rigour, in relationship, it seems to me, with his art-historical project. ‘History of art is the struggle between every experience’? Well, there it is: on the one hand there is the experience of those who placidly await the death of an art to make of it a *corpus* (from which we get the word *corpse*), and later history.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, let’s say there is the avant-garde. Not the ‘psychical capitalisation’, the ‘trust fund’ of which Einstein accused the surrealist-Spanish-royalist Salvador Dalí,¹⁰¹ but the true avant-garde, which bares its chest before the enemy; that is to say, here, the art historian Carl Einstein, who risked his own life, risked being a *corpus* himself, a *cadaver*.¹⁰² Why should an art-historian take such a risk? Among other things, so that the object of his knowledge – art itself – *remain living* and free to invent its forms. In autumn 1938, Einstein wrote to Kahnweiler: ‘Send small packets of tobacco that don’t weigh too much. Some tobacco, some tobacco...’ Just before, and this is in the midst of war, he asked with love (and here is another of his great history lessons, which mind one of Marc Bloch): ‘Picasso and Braque, how are they working? Collect some photos or reproductions for me.’¹⁰³

‘History of art is the struggle...’ – Einstein’s expression, the opening words of the 1929 ‘Methodological Aphorisms’, therefore took on a new and radical significance in 1938: a Jewish German art historian struggling in Spain in order that epistemological courage found its real ethical and political dimension. A Jewish German art historian fighting in Spain – without any proselytising, without seeking to manufacture disciples for a method he knew clung to the impossible – so that Picasso might continue to ‘decompose’ reality; that is to say, to paint *Guernica*.¹⁰⁴

¹ [Translator’s note: This is a translation of “‘Tableau=coupure”: Expérience visuelle, forme et symptôme selon Carl Einstein’, *Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne* 58, Winter 1996, 5-27, which was subsequently incorporated into Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps: histoire de l’art et anachronisme des images*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2000.]

² Carl Einstein, ‘Notes sur le cubisme’, *Documents* 1, no. 3 (1929), 146-155, 147. Translated and introduced by Charles W. Haxthausen as ‘Notes on Cubism’, *October* 107, Winter 2004, 158-168, 161 (translation modified).

³ He is however not mentioned as such by Denis Hollier in his preface to the reprint of *Documents*. See Denis Hollier, ‘La valeur d’usage de l’impossible’, *Documents*, Jean-Michel



Place, Paris, 1991, VII-XXXIV. (Translated by Liesl Ollman as 'The Use Value of the Impossible', *October* 60, Spring 1992, 3-24.) This position is countered by Liliane Meffre, *Carl Einstein et la problématique des avant-gardes*, Peter Lang, Berne, 1989, 98. See also Liliane Meffre, 'Carl Einstein nella redazione di *Documents*: storia dell'arte e etnologia', in *Dal Museo al terreno*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 1987, 180-188, and 'Introduction', *Ethnologie de l'art moderne*, André Dimanche, Marseille, 1993, 7-12.

⁴ Georges Bataille, [Unpublished note], *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 11, Gallimard, Paris, 1988, 572.

⁵ Carl Einstein, 'Lettre sur le roman allemand', trans. A. Malye, *La Phalange*, June 1912; 'Bébuquin', trans. I. Goll, *Action. Cahiers de philosophie et d'art*, no. 5, 1920, 32-43.

⁶⁶ I owe this information, concerning Carl Einstein's unpublished texts, to the kindness of Liliane Meffre.

⁷ Clara Malraux, *Le Bruit de nos pas, IV. Voici que vient l'été*, Grasset, Paris, 1973, 62.

⁸ 'One might speak of a *poetic technique* – technique not in the classical sense of a canon or rule of construction, but comparable to mystical techniques (what Carl Einstein calls the 'training' of ecstasy). [...] Spent the evening at Einstein's, who talked about someone called Puech from whom he's awaiting some articles on Gnosticism and Manicheanism. [...] At the base of all evasion is found not a desire for purity, but fear; and even when one truly believes in loving purity, it is because being other-worldly [*intemporelle*] is not more noble, but only 'intemporal' in the strict sense of the word, that is to say not subject to time and death. All that's just religious cowardice (as [Carl] Einstein says). [...] Bataille, Babelon, Einstein: proofs of their articles for *Documents* no. 2. [...] Dined yesterday at Einstein's with Zette and the Batailles.' Michel Leiris, *Journal 1922-1989*, ed. J. Jamin, Gallimard, Paris, 1992, 137, 154, 164, 167, 202; see also 139-40, 161. The limited time-period (May-September 1929) of these references might suggest, if one recalls Bataille's solitary note and general silence, the hypothesis of a *tension* between Carl Einstein and his young collaborators at that time. This does not at all discount the *circulation* of a common type of aesthetic critique.

⁹ Carl Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Propyläen, Berlin, 1926, 11.

¹⁰ Carl Einstein, *Georges Braque*, trans. E. Zipruth, *Les Chroniques du Jour*, Paris, 1934, 12, where a note indicates that the text was written in 1931-1932. In his lifetime Einstein only knew the French edition, which moreover constitutes his last published work.

¹¹ '[...] we demand that man possesses form and violence at the same time, [...] of which the work contains and creates the operative facts [*faits opérants*].' Carl Einstein, *Politische Anmerkungen* (1912), cited in Meffre, *Carl Einstein et la problématique des avant-gardes*, 33.

¹² 'Every destruction of the object is justified.' *Ibid.*, 41.

¹³ '[...] the old game of dialectical dualism, which is perhaps only the sign of a lazy taste for symmetry [...].' See Carl Einstein, 'Léger: oeuvres récentes', *Documents* 1, no. 4 (1929), 191-195, 191.

¹⁴ Carl Einstein, 'L'enfance néolithique', *Documents* 2, no. 8 (1930), 475-483, 479, 483.

¹⁵ See Einstein, 'Notes sur le cubisme'. On the 'decomposition of the human figure' and Georges Bataille see Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe, ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, Macula, Paris, 1995, 31-164.

¹⁶ Carl Einstein, 'Saint Antoine de Padoue et l'enfant Jésus', *Documents* 1, no. 4 (1929), 230. The picture discussed by Einstein belonged to Jacques Lipchitz. Jurgis Baltustratis (*Anamorphoses ou magie artificielle des effets merveilleux*, Perrin, Paris, 1969, 22-23) dates it to 1535. [Translator's note: An alternative dating of 'c. 18th or early 19th C.' is given in Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, eds., *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS*, Hayward Gallery and MIT Press, London and Cambridge MA, 2006, 95.]



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- ¹⁷ Carl Einstein, 'Exposition "Il Settecento italiano" à Venise', *Documents* 1, no. 5 (1929), 285.
- ¹⁸ Carl Einstein, 'Gravures d'Hercules Seghers', *Documents* 1, no. 4 (1929), 202-208, 202; translated by Charles W. Haxthausen as 'The Etchings of Hercules Seghers', *October* 107, Winter 2004, 154-157, 154.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 202-204; 154-155. Author's italics.
- ²⁰ On Einstein's conception of cubism see Heidemarie Oehm, *Die Kunsttheorie Carl Einsteins*, Fink, Munich, 1976, 70-86; Meffre, *Carl Einstein et la problématique des avant-gardes*, 37-65.
- ²¹ 'The fundamental tectonic forms are none other than the forms of the human body, which accounts for our taking them as the measure of all things. The human body, standard of all things, contains in itself all the elements. The head is a ball, the legs cylindrical columns, the torso a cube, etc. We grasp objects and nature because they are constructed with human forms and tectonic art is only a setting into conformity of the external world with these fundamental elements that come from man.' Carl Einstein, 'Juan Gris: texte inédit', *Documents* 1, no. 5 (1930), 267-268, 268.
- ²² 'If I may be permitted a comparison: a stone thrown into water produces movements of concentric waves. These waves, stopped by the banks, are sent back to the central point and penetrate each other to lose themselves anew in the direction of the banks. Such is the kind of mysterious play enacted by forms concatenated [*enchaînées*] among themselves.' Carl Einstein, 'Exposition Juan Gris (Berlin, galerie Flechtheim)', *Documents* 2, no. 4, 243
- ²³ Carl Einstein, 'L'exposition de l'art abstrait à Zurich', *Documents* 1, no. 6 (1929), 342; 'L'enfance néolithique', 482. See also Meffre, *Carl Einstein et la problématique des avant-gardes*, 31, which cites this unpublished note: 'Gestaltpsychologie – the most simple elements, thus impoverishment and exclusion of psychical complexity [*psychisme complexe*].'
- ²⁴ Carl Einstein, *Georges Braque*, 28. See also 101.
- ²⁵ Carl Einstein and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Correspondance 1921-1939*, ed. and trans. L. Meffre, Marseille, André Dimanche, 1993, 57 (German text 147).
- ²⁶ Carl Einstein, 'Notes sur le cubisme', 155.
- ²⁷ Carl Einstein, *Georges Braque*, 57.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 59-60, 69.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 61, 70.
- ³¹ Carl Einstein, 'Aphorismes méthodiques', *Documents* 1, no. 1 (1929), 32-34; translated and introduced by Charles W. Haxthausen as 'Methodological Aphorisms', *October* 107, Winter 2004, 146-150.
- ³² Carl Einstein, 'Absolu', *Documents* 1, no. 3 (1929), 169-170, 169; for an English translation by Iain White see Alastair Brotchie, ed., *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, Atlas Press, London, 1995, 31-32.
- ³³ Carl Einstein, 'Aphorismes méthodiques', 33, 34.
- ³⁴ Carl Einstein, *Georges Braque*, 25.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 25, 71.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.



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- ³⁹ Ibid., 15, 21, etc.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 73.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 19.
- ⁴² Ibid., 27, 62-63; *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 59.
- ⁴³ Carl Einstein, *Georges Braque*, 58.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 43-44.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 13, 45-46, 54, 65, 107-110.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 48.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 61-63.
- ⁴⁹ i.e., 'quand la couleur est à sa richesse, la forme est à sa plénitude.' See M. Doran, ed., *Conversations avec Cézanne*, Macula, Paris, 1978, 36.
- ⁵⁰ Carl Einstein and D.-H. Kahnweiler, *Correspondance*, 48 (June 1923).
- ⁵¹ Carl Einstein, 'Pablo Picasso. Quelques tableaux de 1928', *Documents* 1, no. 1 (1929), 35-38.
- ⁵² Carl Einstein, 'Picasso', *Documents* 2, no. 3 (1930), 155-157.
- ⁵³ Carl Einstein, *Georges Braque*, 47. Author's italics.
- ⁵⁴ Carl Einstein, 'Notes sur le cubisme', 154.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 147.
- ⁵⁶ Carl Einstein, *Georges Braque*, 22, 64.
- ⁵⁷ See Carl Einstein, 'Exposition des collages (galerie Goemans)', *Documents* 2, no. 4 (1930), 244, which criticises Aragon's position on this issue. On Carl Einstein's calling into question of causality see Matias Martínez-Seekamp, 'Ferien von der Kausalität? Zum Gegensatz von "Kausalität" und "Form" bei Carl Einstein', *Text + Kritik*, no. 95, 1987, 13-22.
- ⁵⁸ See L. Meffre, *Carl Einstein et la problématique des avant-gardes*, 77-82.
- ⁵⁹ Carl Einstein, 'Aphorismes méthodiques', 32.
- ⁶⁰ Carl Einstein, 'André Masson, étude ethnologique', *Documents* 1, no. 2 (1929), 93-103, 95; translated by Michael Richardson as 'André Masson: An Ethnological Study', in Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, eds., *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS*, Hayward Gallery and MIT Press, London and Cambridge, MA, 2006, 245-247 (translation modified). Following the article on Masson was a text by H. Reichenbach, 'Crise de la causalité', which was probably commissioned by Einstein. See H. Reichenbach, 'Crise de la causalité', *Documents* 1, no. 2 (1929), 105-108.
- ⁶¹ Carl Einstein and D.-H. Kahnweiler, *Correspondance*, 54 (June 1923). See H. Oehm, *Die Kunsttheorie Carl Einsteins*, 11-28; Meffre, *Carl Einstein et la problématique des avant-gardes*, 11-25.
- ⁶² On Ernst Mach's philosophy see J. Bradley, *Mach's Philosophy of Science*, Athlone Press, London, 1971; J.T. Blackmore, *Ernst Mach: His Work, Life and Influence*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1972; Rudolf Haller and Friedrich Stadler, eds., *Ernst Mach. Werk und Wirkung*, Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, Vienna, 1988 (with an abundant bibliography, 509-522).
- ⁶³ Ernst Mach, *Die Analyse der Empfindungen und das Verhältnis des Physischen zum Psychischen* (1886-1922), ed. G. Wolters, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1985;



English trans. C.M. Williams, *The Analysis of Sensations and the Relation of the Physical and the Psychological*, Open Court, Chicago, 1914; French trans. F. Eggers and J.-M. Monnoyer, *L'Analyse des sensations. Le rapport du physique au psychique*, Jacqueline Chambon, Nîmes, 1996, 7-38.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 94-152 (on the specific problem of spatial sensations).

⁶⁵ Ernst Mach, *Die Mechanik in ihrer Entwicklung historisch-kritisch dargestellt*, Brockhaus, Leipzig, 1883; trans. T.J. McCormack, *The Science of Mechanics: A Critical and Historical Account of its Development*, Open Court, Chicago, 1902.

⁶⁶ In 1866 Mach wrote: 'Ideas are not formed suddenly, they need time to develop, like all natural beings... Slowly, progressively and with difficulty, one conception is transformed into another, just as it is probable that one animal species continues into new species.' Quoted in Paul-Laurent Assoun, 'Robert Musil lecteur d'Ernst Mach', preface to Robert Musil, *Pour une évaluation des doctrines de Mach* (1908), trans. M.-F. Demet, PUF, Paris, 1985, 28 (note).

⁶⁷ Mach, *L'Analyse des sensations*, 161-172. On the philosophical influence of this work see J.-M. Monnoyer's 'Introduction' in *ibid.*, I-XXXI.

⁶⁸ Ernst Mach, *Erkenntnis und Irrtum. Skizzen zur Psychologie der Forschung*, Barth, Leipzig, 1905; trans. M. Dufour, *La Connaissance et l'erreur*, Flammarion, Paris, 1908, 276. Eng. trans. T.J. McCormack and Paul Foulkes, *Knowledge and Error: Sketches on the Psychology of Enquiry*, D. Reidel, Dordrecht, 1976.

⁶⁹ See Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Introduction à l'épistémologie freudienne*, Payot, Paris, 1981, 73-89.

⁷⁰ See Vladimir Lénine [Lenin], *Matérialisme et empiriocriticisme*, trans. anon., Editions Sociales, Paris 1973 [1908]. Eng. trans. anon., *Materialism and Empirio-criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*, International Publishers, New York, 1970.

⁷¹ Musil, *Pour une évaluation des doctrines de Mach*, 49-170.

⁷² Paul-Laurent Assoun, 'De Mach à la philosophie-sans-qualités', postface to Musil, *Pour une évaluation des doctrines de Mach*, 177-194.

⁷³ Einstein, 'Notes sur le cubisme', 152.

⁷⁴ Einstein, *Georges Braque*, 76.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 28-29, 128. Einstein proposes an analogy – borrowed from Riegl – with the Byzantine art whose 'independence' even implicates 'a new primitivism'. Ibid., 27.

⁷⁶ Carl Einstein, 'Joan Miró (papiers collés à la galerie Pierre)', *Documents* 2, no. 4 (1930), 243.

⁷⁷ Einstein, 'André Masson, étude ethnologique', 102.

⁷⁸ Einstein, 'L'Enfance néolithique', 479-483.

⁷⁹ Einstein, 'Exposition de collages (galerie Goemans)', 244.

⁸⁰ It goes without saying that this theoretical convergence between Benjamin and Einstein deserves more in-depth and nuanced study. It is also necessary to reconstitute historically, even biographically, the strange knot of relations and non-relations between these two thinkers of such parallel destinies. To my knowledge, the current status of archival publication does not yet permit this. [On this point see Sebastian Zeidler's article in this issue of the *Papers of Surrealism*. Tr.]

⁸¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Brighton, 1972.

⁸² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003 [1999], 462.

⁸³ Einstein, *Georges Braque*, 18. Einstein's italics.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 53.



⁸⁵ 'In speaking above of archaism, we mean to designate by that word not formal regressions, but the return, *under obviously different signs*, of determinate psychical dispositions.' *Ibid.*, 117. Author's italics.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 66-67, 113-114.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 31-33.

⁸⁹ On two contradictory ways of understanding the word 'symptom' – the Panofskian and the Freudian – see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 2005, 139-182.

⁹⁰ Einstein, *Georges Braque*, 33.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 111. See Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, C. 479. I have discussed this dialectic of the dream, awakening and reawakening in *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1992, 144-152.

⁹² 'Let us briefly attend to the fact that by his definition of the Unconscious, Freud proves to have seen in the latter primarily a constant formed by the mass of repressions, that is to say a rather negative element. On the contrary we believe that it is precisely in the Unconscious that the chance of the New resides; that it reforms itself ceaselessly and that it can be considered a progressive factor. It is the powerful activation of the Unconscious during vision, as well as during the figurative labour [*accouchement*], which seems to us precisely to confer on artworks that inexplicable something, vision remaining, in the final analysis, a mysterious element.' Einstein, *Georges Braque*, 118.

⁹³ Witness the posthumous sketch, 'Traité de la vision', reproduced in *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 58, Winter 1996, 30-49.

⁹⁴ Einstein and Kahnweiler, *Correspondance*, 52 (June 1923).

⁹⁵ Carl Einstein, *Bébuquin ou les dilettantes du miracle* [1912], trans. S. Wolf, EST-Samuel Tastet, Paris, 1987, 11, 17, 19, 30-32.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹⁷ Einstein and Kahnweiler, *Correspondance*, 52 (June 1923).

⁹⁸ For the story of this suicide see Malraux, *Le Bruit de nos pas*, 62-63.

⁹⁹ 'When I left Paris without saying a word, I knew very well why. I understood at a moment when others were not seeing clearly what is being played out here. I left my contracts, a publishing house in the process of being set up, and quite a lot of things. And I am happy to have done so. I left when all that should have begun to go very well for me. My manuscripts are on hold; whatever. I left without taking leave, since I did not want to give explanations. Leaving words behind; quitting metaphors. For I was never a poetic pen-pusher [*rond de cuir*] and never will be.' Einstein and Kahnweiler, *Correspondance*, 106-107 (January 1939)

¹⁰⁰ On the double – metaphysical and positivist – aspect of this *mortification*, by the historian, of his or her object, see Didi-Huberman, *Confronting the Image*, 42-52.

¹⁰¹ Einstein, 'Exposition de collages (galerie Goemans)', 244.

¹⁰² On Carl Einstein's notion of the avant-garde, see Klaus H. Kiefer, *Avantgarde – Weltkrieg – Exil. Materialien zu Carl Einstein und Salomo Friedlander / Mynona*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 1986.

¹⁰³ Einstein and Kahnweiler, *Correspondance*, 100-101 (Autumn 1938).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 109 and 113-115 (letter to Picasso, 6 January 1939).

