

## “The Cubist years”

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Translator: Simon Pleasance

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*Juan Gris : correspondances avec Léonce Rosenberg, 1915-1927. Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne, hors-série/Archives*, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 1999

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- 1 To avoid being any longer confined within the circle of apparently resolved issues, art history must forever be harking back (in the critical sense) to its own history. One of the key trends defining our view of the origins of contemporary art and the abstract picture is undoubtedly Cubism. And it is described in many a study and monograph. These days, publications appear to announce (albeit somewhat coyly, for the time being) a critical re-reading of Cubism and abstract art, in a much wider perspective of the debate about modernity. In this context, the articles published in two catalogues recently devoted to the Cubist years, and to the art of Robert Delaunay between 1906 and 1914, are of particular significance. The catalogue for the exhibition at Villeneuve d'Ascq, presenting the collections of Cubists offered to the National Museum of Modern Art, and the Museum of Modern Art in Lille, underscores, on the one hand, the role played by collectors, thereby emphasizing the social aspect of the way this tendency works, and, on the other, in C. Green's article, it challenges once again the static definition of Cubism. Juan Gris' correspondence with his dealer, Léonce Rosenberg, is an interesting complement to the

first of these issues. It illustrates the commitments stemming from a financial contract which, in part at least, determined the creator of Cubism's artistic production, as well as the long-term commercial strategies of the dealer, who would later become a promoter of abstract art and the Purists.

- 2 But to come back to C. Green's article, which concerns us here, it is worth stressing that by mentioning the contradictions within the tendency, the author is not concerned with the differences between those who created Cubism (Picasso, Braque versus the rest); on the contrary, he thinks rather about the fragmentation of the Cubist discourse into several contradictions, the main ones having to do with the clash between idealism and materialism (imaginary space versus tactile surface), structure and disorientation, as well as the tensions within the sign open to polysemy, interpreted from a semiological viewpoint. What, however, most radically defines the modernity of Cubism--writes Green--is its progressive discourse, within which, in a nutshell, there is an admission of the contradictions as the very foundation of the process of evolution. Here one can see echoes of Hegelian dialectics, or alternatively--as Green would have it--the announcement of a postmodernist way of opening up to the heterogeneous relations between artist, work, and viewer.
- 3 A similar problem to do with the existence of the work in progress and, at the same time, the process whereby postmodernism has become rooted in modernity, would seem (for the authors, G. Roque and P. Rousseau, do not actually say as much in so many words) to lie at the root of the two main essays in the *Robert Delaunay* catalogue. From this angle, what hallmarks the development of this artist's oeuvre is the tendency towards pure visuality as the end purpose of painting. Delaunay's abstraction is based on a contradiction (which the artist overcomes during the creative process): the contradiction which, between the reality of the world and the non-objectivity of light, makes the world visually accessible. So for the man who created Orphic Cubism, abstraction is not the end purpose of art; it is a means of destabilizing representation. Otherwise put, it involves a conjunction between the construction of a visual synthesis (in an independent work) and the analysis of a modern subject. « Representative harmony, the synchronous movement (simultaneity) of light, which is the only reality » (R. Delaunay): this is what the final consequence of the creative process should be, taken in this way. Putting reality alongside the abstraction of vision and not on the side of the represented subject, in a way. According to G. Roque and P. Rousseau, Delaunay's statement, made in the period of a crisis in painting, was the very fiercest defence of the image which, « worked by chromatic vibrations [...] involved in the onlooker not a sense of satisfaction, but a retinal confusion » (p. 64), giving rise to an « immediate sensation of light », which might also be defined as « the sublime element of pure perception » (p. 90). In this context, it seems a wise idea not only to look for convergences and differences between Delaunay's art and the art of the Russian avant-garde (this issue is broached in J-C. Marcadé's article), but also to raise once again the question of the coherence and consequences of Cubism as a modernist trend.
- 4 In a way, this latter issue recurs in the catalogue *Georges Braque: l'espace*. Braque, just like Delaunay, is introduced here as a champion of painting, setting forth in his utterances « an absolute parallelism between moment of creation and eye » (p. 15). Unlike Delaunay, though, who was the creator of a visual synthesis of the movement and light of the contemporary world, Braque is an analyst of the object constructing the « tactile space » of the picture.

- 5 The re-publication of Ozenfant and Jeanneret's manifesto, *Après le Cubisme*, which first appeared in 1918, and is now enhanced by F. Ducros' critical essay, rounds off this turbulent image of Cubism--the Cubism in which attempts to transgress the established concepts of the work and ways of painting (including sorts of paintings) turn out to be of greater significance than the formulae and doctrines of the «Cubist» system. This emerges all the more clearly if, in re-reading the manifesto of the founders of Purism, who criticized Cubism for its decorative character, we take up a position within the perspective of *L'Esprit moderne*, and the attempts at rationalizing contemporary art, confined once and for all in the 1920s within the utopia of functionalism.
- 6 The current interest in Cubism is imbued with a certain aloofness in relation to the «fundamental notions» of the history of contemporary art. By using the term «the years of Cubism», as the organizers of the Villeneuve d'Ascq do, there is an evident mistrust with regard to the established programme of 20th century art, divided into antagonistic tendencies. Even if the critical discourse on Cubism has not been altogether reinstated, it is this mistrust towards Cubism that seems clearly to harbinge it.