

## THE ELEMENT OF PLAY IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ART

In approaching contemporary art it is useless to try to determine to what extent it conforms or not to a previously conceived notion of art acquired from past centuries. It is more advisable instead to understand what idea, perhaps even an original one, this art imposes on us. In other words, when faced with a new experience, we should draw from it the original "problematic," that is, formulate appropriate ideas to explain it. If we limit ourselves to the first years of the twentieth century, we can observe both in its content and style one particular characteristic: the importance of play. Artists have sought in related activities, such as dance or music, an image analogous to their own. They have sometimes looked for it in activities like those that interested Vermeer: *The Weigher of Pearls* or *Lady with a Spinet* (in Buckingham Palace), or in this inscription of the artist in one of his paintings relating to music: *Musica laetitiae comes, medicina dolorum*, which we are tempted to take as a motto and to apply to the activity of the painter himself. The same impression is

Translated by Malcolm Sylvers.

## *The Element of Play in Twentieth Century Art*

given by some of the paintings of Watteau, the *Musician* or the *Indifferent*, in which we feel that the painter wanted to say something about himself. Through this catalogue of images of music or dance the artist seems to have acquired with particular pleasure an awareness of the possibility of his own art. These somewhat remote images are the ancestors of a family of buffoons, harlequins and clowns, which multiply to an extraordinary extent at the beginning of the twentieth century.

At the end of the nineteenth century poetry calls upon dancers, musicians, a host of symbolic personages: the *clown* of Banville, the *dandy* of Baudelaire, the *Pierrot* of Laforgue, the *dancers* of Mallarmé and Valéry, a whole family of marginal beings who reveal man's essential inspiration and not only point to something pure, gracious, light and delicate but also declare it to be essential. The tone may be nostalgic or facetious, but all these poetic figures propose the access itself to the poetic world as the new content of poetry. Thus poetry prepares and accompanies whatever is later manifest in art.

\*

After Degas' dancers, the harlequins and card players of Cézanne, the girls and circus players of Lautrec, the emphasis increases and we can see clearly that it is assured in the work of Picasso, which sums up this new inspiration. Picasso's entire career is punctuated by a series of experiments that conclude with a great work; the artist's obsession with creating masterpieces has been periodic and formative. The great work in the Chester Dale Collection of Chicago, the *Family of Mountebanks*, terminates the cycle of the blue and rose periods. From 1900-1901, adopting the theme of circus people in the *Harlequin*, a melancholic self-portrait, Picasso rapidly passed on to some striking figures: *The Young Acrobat*, on a red background, *The Two Companions*, in which we already find the cheerless outlook of the *Family of Mountebanks*, showing distress in the face of impassive nature. The juxtaposition of the huge athlete sitting on a cube with the silhouette of the young dancer balancing on a ball introduces symbolic suggestions. Soon the human family, including the familiar monkey, enter into the theme. In the above-mentioned

painting in the Chester Dale Collection everything converges, everything is important: expressionless nature, not used in any particular way, costumes of faded colors, the tired and feverish expressions of the clowns, the charming and morbid elegance of the young woman seated aside. Rilke, after seeing the painting in 1905 in Munich, at the home of Madame Herta von Koenig, described it definitively in his second elegy to Duino. The theme of the mountebanks, those nomads devoted to acrobatics and to the illusory efforts of a spectacle that must always begin again, is for him marvelously suited for representing all human life. Rarely has a poem been more faithful to the inspiration of a painter. "Who are they, the wanderers, these men who are even more fugitive than we ourselves..." he writes. Thus the theme invokes an overall generalization.

Picasso sometimes comes back to this theme in a masterpiece such as the *Musicians*, in Basle. But the theme passed on to other artists. From 1910-1915 we note that it has become a common feature of European art. Only the tone changes: with Derain, in the neo-classic style that is perhaps the best aspect of his art, the thick lines and harsh colors accentuate the impression of malaise given in the *Two Musicians*, the badly placed Pierrot and the Harlequin standing on one foot in an uncomfortable position. We have a brilliant interpretation in the delightful cast-iron *Harlequin* by Gargallo, who makes original use of *découpages* and graphic inventions. The top of the face is no longer a mask, and the body is gathered as it were into the horizontal line of the musical instrument.

\*

When Chagall arrived from Vitebsk to discover in Paris the particular essence of the period, one of his first compositions was a figure in the same spirit, the *Musician*, who is a musician literally wandering the rooftops, the symbol of inspiration. Thus the motif runs through our epoch. Thirty years later the Mexican painter Tamayo at the beginning of his career quite naturally too rediscovers this motif in *The Rose Flutist*, an enormous and touching figure who is completely inflated by his playing and appears as though sucked up by the breath exhaled from his

## *The Element of Play in Twentieth Century Art*

small head. In this work the balance is achieved, as with Gargallo's, by the horizontal line of the flute.

But the theme could be amplified in an entirely different direction. Precisely in the same period as Picasso, Rouault conceived his tragic family of clowns. They too are endowed with remarkable symbolic power. The artist's water colors and paintings of fairs and circuses are among his most impressive work. And somewhat later, when his style became more serious and less aggressive, it was in the faces of wounded, tragic clowns that he expressed his feeling about life. Here there is a kind of counterpoint that is important to define. But around 1910-1915, in the milieu of Max Jacob, Picasso, Apollinaire, who at a certain time associated with Stravinsky, a change took place that was more than a change in inspiration. It was a change in conception. In 1917, an important date for *Parade*, the themes reappear in Picasso's *Theatre Curtain* for the last time. They even inspire the costumes. *The New York Manager* shows how tempting it was, once the symbol had been chosen, to draw on it for formal manipulations. In fact we cannot separate the classic images of harlequins from the experiments of cubism. The history of cubism can be reduced to the history of the guitar or mandolin and their metamorphoses. But the very choice of these instruments has an interesting iconographic significance. In their more beautiful works of the years 1911-1912, Braque and Picasso diverted themselves by transforming the musicians into composite figures, making the metamorphosis of the musician start with his instrument. Thus we have *The Mandolin Player* by Picasso, or somewhat later the *Guitarist* by Braque, in which the problem was to associate the forms, to schematize the human figure in the image of the instrument, to absorb in some way the instrument into the figure or vice versa. Sometimes the shape of the mandolin triumphantly dominates the composition.

Things are still more enriched in the work of Juan Gris, when not only the guitar, a privileged object, but the accoutrements of more elementary games, chess, backgammon, card games also enter the painting. All these motifs naturally call for the metamorphosis of the forms. The musical instrument radiates throughout the entire composition, in which it is associated with the backgammon board, the dice game, etc. For the moment it

suffices to note these convergences and the pliancy given the new art from the choice of these symbols. For trained and speculative minds like Braque and Juan Gris, the choice inspired a kind of discipline and demonstrated very well the profound instinct that led the painter to combinations of dissociated forms. In the checkerboard lie abstract calculations and there is an invisible mathematics to music. This can easily be extended to include the inspiration of Léger in this period. It is not by chance that the *Card Game* in 1917 marks one of the first great symbolic compositions showing inflexible, mechanized figures. Ten years later in one of the painter's most lively and brilliant compositions, all the motifs come together—still life, the figure, landscape—retranslated into a symbolism of playing cards and games, the card quite naturally occupying the central position.

The works that could be included in this category increase the power of suggestion, or, if we like, the musical power of painting through the play of privileged images. Among the Fauves the principle of inspiration lies elsewhere and we must look for an analogy other than music or games based on mathematical calculation, reflection and mental exercise. Here painting draws its inspiration from holiday celebrations, from the hurly-burly of the street, as is clearly shown by such subjects as the Fourteenth of July and the effervescent street scenes rendered so well in the famous canvases of Marquet and Dufy. This genre was to have its most brilliant and convincing expression in dance themes and the *joie de vivre* which Matisse in these same years captures in a lasting way. Starting with color, he too created an iconography for his own use, capable of rivaling the work that in the same period was composed by the friends of cubism, Braque and Picasso, with whom he naturally kept in contact. Here there is a metamorphosis of forms as complex as that which we have noted in the *Guitar Players* who are confounded with their instruments. But here the figure is extended into arcs and reverse curves and has an elasticity of movement that denotes a kind of game played with specific energy. Matisse remains entirely faithful to this iconography and so do his friends. The race tracks, the dance halls, the orchestras were to inspire Dufy until the end of his life.

*The Element of Play in Twentieth Century Art*

\*

A third category that could be defined begins with the mask and ends with nightmarish images. Ensor is the leading representative of this genre. After 1889 he concentrated on repeating the same theme, becoming enslaved to it—which is characteristic of the spell cast by symbolic images. In 1889 he introduces himself in the midst of the masks in order to stress that the painting is a symbolic allegory of human existence, and also, more significantly, a symbol that relates to the activity of the painter himself.

It would be unjust to trace this development without including the original twist that metaphysical painting, beginning in 1910-1911-1912, gave to it, a kind of somber and satiric parody of the *joie de vivre* of the Fauves and of Picasso's world of delicate buffoons. This is a style of painting that is crude, deliberately indelicate, and that stresses something essential, be it in the feeling of the strangeness of the space, or even more in the figure, where instead of the musical silhouette, the form transformed by the inspiration of music, we have the mannequin with stitches of the seams showing, its head crammed with musical notes and fake instruments. This is an obvious parody of what we have observed among the cubists. With Carrà even the checkerboard and the painter's tools are included! The feeling of unreality here becomes one of anguish. It was during this period that T. S. Eliot voiced his sharpest commentary on life in his poem, *The Hollow Men*. Painting and poetry were agreed on the feeling of a certain "difficulty of being."

\*

The increasing unrealism of images is related to the growing unrealism in style. Absence of realism is complementary to people and objects having to do with entertainment. We find ourselves in the midst of a general symbolism which can appropriately be called the "world of play," the world of *ludus*. From the moment when this kind of symbol begins profoundly to occupy the artists' imagination, a new concept of invention becomes possible. Everything occurs as if the new imagery, whose extent and profusion

we see in the years 1910-1920, had invaded art, at a moment when the contemporary world was becoming aware of a certain impoverishment in society. Art consciously asserts an obscure aspect of human life that is compromised or stifled by modern development. We observe in our society something that could be called a growing "deficit" of a higher form of play, and in human activity in general, beginning with the nineteenth century, when men lack the occasion for rewarding and stimulating diversion from the everyday concern with earning a living. Moreover, the pace of work and industrial production eliminates the personal element in work and deprives an increasing number of individuals of the chance for concrete satisfaction, thus producing a nostalgia for creative activity. In his old age Renoir perceived this and dared to say of his time, "many people who would have been excellent artisans in the eighteenth century, making chairs in the style of Louis XV, or painting porcelain [and Renoir knew something about this for he had himself been a painter of porcelain], no longer finding the opportunity to produce chairs or decorate china, have turned to painting, without any great gain for this art." Painting became and continues to be increasingly the refuge of all sorts of elements inhibited by the organization of work in modern times. We expect a personal liberation from it. Art is now asserting its own initiative and prerogative.

\*

We are familiar with the old concept of art as a kind of luxury or compensatory product, a gratification of unused energies for which free and unmotivated feelings are essential. According to this opinion, one must only be made to sense the necessary atmosphere. We could go further. The concept of *homo ludens*, man at play, must be introduced into the overall anthropological view of *homo faber*, working man, and *homo sapiens*, thinking man. Between the working man and the man of learning there is an immense middle ground. The description of man is poorly conceived and remains incomplete if we neglect occupations that pertain neither to serious activity nor to mental activity, but relate instead to play. Every civilization, as Caillois has expressed it,

## *The Element of Play in Twentieth Century Art*

following Huizinga, is characterized by the type of games that are played. The role of play, as vital for the individual as for society, is a composite of elements evident in educational activities, of theater and liturgy, which concern art. Art broadly defined is the creation of symbolic forms capable of clarifying everything in our experience and emotions. There is no human life possible without a symbolic order. It is to this order that the prodigious, and undoubtedly often abusive, expectation born of art is addressed.

This revealing and daring analogy, discovered around 1910-1920, between art and play and between leisure activity and artistic activity, soon produced major consequences. Perhaps what historians will call the crisis of art in the middle of this century is only an effect of a certain need for play, of a need for the feeling of play, and its discovery in art. The attitude toward play signifies two things: first, detachment, separation from practical activity, involving an element of make-believe. We put ourselves into a kind of active dream, like card players, or children who are absorbed in what they are building and oblivious to everything else that happens. Second, due to a specific psychological adjustment, there is fascination in the sense that, as a result of this detachment, this fiction, a new and exceptional interest is created. Perhaps the game of chess best defines this typical attitude. Thus, games entail a sort of de-realization or escape from the immediate reality. But they give rise to a symbolic reality of such intensity that certain relationships take on a fascinating character.

Modern art has multiplied the indications in the same direction. Painting activates its symbolic tendencies and adopts new devices. The cubists, by fragmenting objects and altering human figures, sought a concatenation of forms so that nothing inert remained in the painting. It is up to the spectators to appreciate the ellipses, to learn to read the few brief signs, allusive and rich, which are signs of the mind at work, and which act on the simplest elements: an eye, a profile, a lock of hair... Nothing indicates better the way to look at these works than the playful criticism indulged in by the group, the poems of Apollinaire or certain fast-paced, witty theater featuring a play on words. It is the only form of art criticism that is on the same



level, as we see from a poem by Roger Vildrac entitled *Humorage to Picasso* (translate *humor* plus *homage*: *humorage*).

Cet arbre fait comme un tombeau  
Cet astre comme un numéro  
Ce soleil comme escargot  
C'est Picagot.

(in *Documents*, 1930)

Two major trends stem from this, represented on the one hand by Delaunay, and on the other by Klee. In a striking canvas by Severini, *North-South* (1912), we see very well what is in store: a search for simultaneous elements which allows painting, through decentralized composition, to open up in all directions. And soon after, in the extraordinary *Bal Tabarin*, the fractioning, the splitting, the multiplication of forms, and the representations that are essential to this entire order of invention, give the idea of the *total image*, that is, the image capable of responding to a situation or a milieu entirely given over to the glorification of the festival. The same effect is produced in the *Town* (1910) by Delaunay; one might comment on it with the aid of Apollinaire or Cendrars. We are no longer viewing a spectacle, but something that we can grasp only through a symbol: an entire city in the spirit of "unanimism," or in the spirit of those poems by Apollinaire that link together fragments of conversations, sentences heard here and there, in order to represent the totality that envelops us. Between the curtains of a window we see rooftops, sections of buildings, and in the center a woman's hand, which completes and even perfectly organizes the hole composition. Starting with this, a series of works quickly follow on one another. In the *Multiple Windows* of 1912, Delaunay develops this inspiration in a more abstract sense, arriving at pure interlocking forms, and he ends with the chrome disks with their steady pulsations of his famous *Joie de vivre*. Gaiety is apparent in Delaunay, but not humor. And it is precisely this quality that is needed to enter into the work of Klee. By comparison with the *Carpet of Memory*, futurist paintings appear a little clumsy and studied. The image seems to emerge by itself, complete, self-contained, comparable to what psycholo-

## *The Element of Play in Twentieth Century Art*

gists call the "dream image," an image that imposes itself upon us and which we have only to register. *The City R.* is much more remote from us than that painted by Delaunay. In the charming design *What is Happening to Me?* the problem is to know to what extent one can take seriously the multiplication of the narrow little iron bed, in which the sleeper is curled, finally transformed into a play horse. It is not by chance that Klee presents the symbolic figure of the clown as a tightrope walker. The pink canvas barred by a huge white cross conveys the feeling of instability and at the same time of extraordinary balance which is preserved. The multiple effects of Delaunay and the "dream images" of Klee are landmarks in a realm in which we later encounter the studied *naïveté* of Chagall, the amiable Miro in his inventions of devilish animalcules and even *The Little Train of Murnau* by Kandinsky, which has the advantage of showing how, under the influence of the Douanier Rousseau, the landscape becomes fantastic and converts to an abstract image.

But the power to de-realize inherent in play necessarily again put in question art itself. This was the work of the Dadaists, and more particularly of Marcel Duchamp. It is not by chance that we find from the beginning the theme of the *Chess Players* (1912) and reflection on play which will provoke the death of painting. In *Le passage de la Vierge à la mariée*, the inorganic monster, made of membranes and valves, adds all its force of derision and sarcasm to the harlequins and symbolic figures of the cubists. One could even comment on it, quoting a passage from Boetius, in the third book *De consolatione philosophiae*, "If men had eyes like Lynceus, capable of penetrating obstacles, would not the body of Alcibiades, so beautiful on the exterior, appear quite repulsive with his entrails apparent to the eye. If therefore you appear beautiful, you do not owe it to your nature, but to the weakness of the eyes that look at you." The neo-Platonic thinker spoke as a moralist, but the artist, taking literally the example of Lynceus' eyes, invented de-mystification, from which *Dada* was born. Art was to be dissipated in the instinct of a game devised to astonish and embarrass us. Picasso more than once set out on this path. His drawing, *Unknown Masterpiece*, which is one of his most brilliant graphic works, gives a very clear example of this. Contemporary art is forced as

it were to acknowledge it. And we owe to Dubuffet a work entitled *Art et plaisanterie*, which we could illustrate with convincing images borrowed from his paintings: "For us then are not these innocent little jokes but the powerful ones, those that make you freeze on the spot, which turn you into stone." Art should make us laugh a little and also frighten us a little. Thus it becomes a function of the mind's inclination to play.

The same author adds: "the most vulgar materials... the voices of dust, the soul of stone, are much more interesting to me than a flower, a tree, a horse... I am always at the border between plain daubing and a small masterpiece." This appeal to the cast-off, the insignificant, is in itself important. It directs our attention to the manipulations that are the last resource of art coincident with play. One of the first to have practiced this exercise was perhaps Brancusi in his montage of worn pieces of wood, entitled *Young Girl*. The genius of Picasso has led him, as everyone knows, to the salvage of refuse. The now famous *Tête de bœuf*, composed of an old saddle and a bicycle handlebar, is the perfect example of a work that owes its inspiration to a playful attitude and to the masterful ease of an artist who has no other attributes than initiative and humor. From this follow ceramic pieces such as *Le coq*, more mocking than diabolic, or *Le guerrier*, whose eye is the stud of a helmet. Naturally, we place at the end of this parade, Calder, whose success is so significant, who invents new toys, and who recaptures flowers and birds from the serious artists.

If we speak of the crisis of art in the twentieth century, we must understand it as an aspect of the crisis in the element of play in modern civilization. The importance assumed by art perhaps answers the search for an outlet and more room to breathe in a world without festivals, a world in which play is degraded, thus entailing a difficult redistribution of psychological energies. In this world the artist and his behavior, as we have just seen, are singularly valued. But on the other hand we can only determine the tendency of art to manifest itself simply in the intention to amuse; in other words, as a game that no longer has rules. Doesn't this complacency lead the artist to deny himself, that is, to refuse the means of fulfilling the expectation born of

*The Element of Play in Twentieth Century Art*

him? Unless it may only be a question of his working toward self-realization? The evolution of art in the second half of the twentieth century seems to answer this question quite well.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- J. HUIZINGA, *Homo ludens*, essai sur la fonction sociale du jeu (Coll. "les Essais"), Paris, 1951.
- R. CAILLOIS, "Le Jeu et le sacré," in: *L'homme et le sacré* (coll. "les Essais"), Paris, 1960.
- E. BENVENISTE, "Le jeu comme structure," in *Deucalion* n. 2, Paris, 1947.
- R. CAILLOIS, *Les jeux et les hommes*, Paris, 1955.
- A. CHASTEL, "Le jeu et le sacré dans l'art moderne," in *Critique*, May (n. 96) and June (n. 97), 1955.
- A. CHASTEL, "L'art moderne et le jeu," in *Arte e Cultura contemporanea*, (University lessons of 1963), Venice, 1964.
- H. LADENDORF, "Zur Frage der künstlerischen Phantasie," in *Museion*, Studien aus Kunst und Geschichte für Otto H. Forster, Cologne, p. 21-35 (on the principle of irrealism).
- G. R. HOCHÉ, *Die Welt als Labyrinth*, Manier und Manie in der europäischen Kunst, Hamburg, 1957 (on the value of irrealist and surrealist themes; a very dubious historical interpretation, but a document of twentieth century culture).
- M. JEAN & A. MEZEI, *Histoire de la peinture surréaliste*, Paris, 1959.
- J. DUBUFFET, *Prospectus aux amateurs en tout genre*, Paris, 1946.