

# **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 10, 2018

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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# *Cubism and Kant*

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ABSTRACT. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (1920), Picasso's dealer and early authority on cubism, interpreted Picasso, Braque and Gris as Kantian in their approach. In §1 I provide an introduction to cubism and to Kahnweiler's use of Kantian terminology to distinguish analytic and synthetic cubism. §2 concerns the 'idealist' interpretation of cubism in which the works are seen as attempting to depict Kantian things-in-themselves. I argue that this interpretation betrays a misunderstanding of Kant and it is at odds with Picasso's pluralism. In §3 I suggest an alternative Kantian interpretation of cubism, one that draws on Kant's empirical realism and the cognitive input that is necessary for experience. In §4 this is contrasted with the two-aspect reading of transcendental idealism. Lastly, in §5, I acknowledge that the major cubists had limited or no knowledge of Kant, but nevertheless argue that it is illuminating to see their works in terms of Kantian realism.

## **1. Cubism**

Since the Renaissance artists have attempted to represent how things look from a particular, one-point, perspective. The picture frame can be seen as holding a transparent sheet through which viewers look, and from which, behind the painting, the scene recedes. Cubists reject such an 'illusionist' approach since, according to George Braque, '[i]t is simply a trick—a bad

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trick—which makes it impossible for an artist to convey a full experience of space, since it forces the objects in a picture to disappear away from the beholder instead of bringing them within his reach, as painting should' (Verstegen, 2014, p. 294). Further, it is a misrepresentation of what we actually see. Such perspective assumes that the viewer is motionless, that their vision consists of input to a single eye, and that everything in the visual field is in focus. In contrast, cubist works represent simultaneously the shapes and surfaces of objects from different perspectives. Objects are 'analysed' in terms of facets at shallow angles to the picture surface, and they do not recede from the eye. In a series of drawings by Juan Gris, starting with *The Eggs* (1911), one can sense traditional perspective beginning to fracture, with the journey to full-blown cubism culminating in *Bottles and Knife* (1912).<sup>2</sup> (That same precariousness can be sensed in cubism itself: holding sway for a few short years, shimmering, briefly, before it fragmented into futurism, constructivism, abstraction and the rest.) Gris is usually considered to be the third serious cubist, along with Picasso and Braque. The latter are often distinguished from 'salon' cubists such as Fauconnier, Gleizes and Metzinger; 'salon' was intended pejoratively since they exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants, an annual exhibition avoided by Picasso and Braque, in favour of Kahnweiler's commercial gallery. Salon

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<sup>2</sup> Reproductions of the artworks I discuss are now just a click away, and so I recommend viewing the images to which I refer as you read through the paper. Title and date should suffice to locate an open access version. I will provide further bibliographic details for those images it is difficult to find. For this series of works see Green (1992, pp. 165–9).

cubists were widely disparaged: 'their appreciation of true cubism was barely skin-deep and they employed a timid sort of faceting and cubification as a pictorial system' (Cooper, 1971, p. 127).

Cubists employed various techniques to realise, in Braque's phrase above, a 'full experience of space'. The emphasis on volumes led cubists away from the eye and visual appearances to tactile experience of reality. The subject matter of their paintings were things that you wanted to touch. Braque explained that his still lives evoked 'tactile space' (Verstegen, 2014, p. 293): there are tables with newspapers to leaf through, musical instruments to grasp and pluck. Braque, always more willing to articulate the approach than Picasso, says: 'It isn't enough to make visible what one paints; it must also become tangible. A still-life ceases to be a still-life the moment it can no longer be reached with the hand' (Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 42). Volume is also given by '*passage*': 'The merging of planes with space by leaving one edge unpainted or light in tone' (Richardson, 1996, p. 97). Objects are tipped so volumes can be seen from within. There is no vanishing point in cubist works, no destination behind the transparent screen towards which one's eye is led; one's eye, rather, is loosely directed by the artist to rove over roof and table tops.

There is a sense, then, in which cubist paintings are sculptural. Picasso did turn to sculpture, but, at least at first, the results were a less radical departure from the canon. His *Head of a Woman* (1909–10) is more or less a traditional bust, albeit with distortions. Radical departures, though, were to come. Carving was replaced by the construction of cubist guitars and glasses of absinthe; voids were used to depict volumes, light itself depicted by



pointillist dots, and paint applied to works to inhibit the natural effects of shadow. Julio Gonzalez, friend, welding teacher, and collaborator with Picasso on sculpture projects, emphasizes the sculptural nature of Picasso's cubist paintings: 'With these paintings it is only necessary to cut them out—the colours are the only indications of different perspectives, of planes inclined from one side or the other—then assemble them according to the indications given by the colour, in order to find oneself in the presence of a "sculpture"' (Aparicio, et al., 2017, p. 49).<sup>3</sup>

Cézanne was a key influence, or as put by Gleizes and Metzinger: 'He who understands Cézanne, is close to cubism' (1912; cited in Herbert, 1965, p. 4). He, too, created volumes from flat coloured planes, and used subtle distortions of perspective: in *Basket with Apple, Bottle, Biscuits and Fruit* (1893), for example, the plate of biscuits is tilted towards the viewer and the two sides of the table do not seem to meet under the tablecloth. In a letter to his son, Cézanne writes: 'Here, on the river bank, the motifs multiply, the same subject seen from a different angle offers a subject of the most compelling interest, and so varied that I believe I could keep busy for months without changing position but by leaning a little to the right and then to the left' (Rewald, 1976, p. 324). The variations in view obtained were painted, together, on the canvas. Cubists took this method to extremes: instead of merely leaning to the right or left, they looked at objects from the other side or from above and, as with Cézanne, simultaneously combined such viewpoints in their works. Picasso and Braque acknowledged their debt

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<sup>3</sup> For the relation between Picasso's paintings and sculpture, see Cowling and Golding (1994).

to 'The Master of Provence', quoting from him in various works: the drapes in the proto-cubist *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) are derived from Cézanne's *Female Bathers in Front of a Tent* (1883–5), as are the poses of some of the figures (Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 9). A wonderful episode recalled by Pierre Daix (1993, p. 339) expresses Picasso's respect for Cézanne: 'he informed Kahnweiler that he had "bought the Sainte-Victoire." "Which one?" Kahnweiler asked, unaware of any Cezanne on the market'. One of Cézanne's favourite subjects was the mountain Sainte-Victoire, close to his home in Provence. "'The real one!" Picasso was crowing with pleasure. He had, in fact, just bought the Chateau de Vauvenargues, whose grounds include the famous mountain'.

Some of the more impenetrable works such as *The Accordionist* (1911) and *Still Life with Glass and Lemon* (1910) skirt close to abstraction or what Douglas Cooper disparagingly calls, 'cubism's misbegotten child' (Richardson, 1959, p. 40). The objects in *Still Life with Liquor Bottle* (1909) were so inscrutable that they were not identified until 1971, from a sketch in which Picasso drew the real objects.<sup>4</sup> *Still Life with Glasses and Bottle* (1912) was also for ten years mistakenly called *The Battleship* after an exhibition catalogue compiler presumably took the table top with glasses to be the deck of a ship with cannons (actually quite a plausible reading in the absence of a title) (Kahng et al., 2011, p. 49). Cubism is a key stage on the path to what some see as the ultimate end-point of modernism, that of abstraction, and cubism had influenced early abstract artists such as

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<sup>4</sup> See Karmel (2017, p. 130). Picasso also, apparently, did not remember years later the representational content of *Pointe de la Cité* (1911) (Daix, 1993, p. 104).

Mondrian and Malevich to break free from representation and the vestiges of it in their own cubist works. Picasso and Braque, though, were vehemently 'realist'. Their distortions may presage surrealism and abstraction to come, but, as Cooper puts it, they were wholeheartedly engaged in 'solving the strictly pictorial problem arising out of their intention to find a wholly new and precise way of recreating tangible reality on canvas' (Cooper, 1971, p. 62). Viewers are aided by triggers or signposts—or what Picasso called 'attributes' (Gilot & Lake, 1964, pp. 65–6)—that enable us to orientate ourselves with respect to the shimmering facets and thus appreciate the subject matter of these works.<sup>5</sup> Carefully placed amidst the 'cognitive fog' (Baxandall, 1994) of otherwise inscrutable configurations of facets and scaffolding we find a coat button, guitar strings, the f-holes of violins, cigarette smoke, an ear lobe or eyelid, a quiff of hair, or a segment of lemon. An anecdote recalled by John Richardson nicely captures Picasso's attitude to abstraction: 'People who urged Picasso to look

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<sup>5</sup> Kahnweiler claims "The object once "recognized" in the painting is now "seen" with a perspicuity of which no illusionistic art is capable' (1920, p. 12). Gombrich (1959, p. 263), however, is somewhat unimpressed by cubist claims to realism: 'Cubists...kicked aside the whole tradition of faithful vision and tried to start again with the "real object" which they squashed against the picture plane. One can enjoy the resulting confusion of telescoped images as commentary on the unresolved complexities of vision without accepting the claim that they represent reality more really than a picture based on projective geometry'—Gombrich, here, echoing an early uncomprehending review of an exhibition of Picasso's drawings at the Stafford Gallery, London (1912), in which a reviewer quipped that a depicted 'skull...has obviously been under a steam roller' (Galassi & McCully, 2011, p. 40).

more favourably on abstract art because it was the pictorial equivalent of music would be told "That's why I don't like music" (Richardson, 1996, p. 165).<sup>6,7</sup>

Cubists have been interpreted as Kantians by, amongst others, Kahnweiler, Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg (1960). There are several features of their works that are seen as Kantian, including the attempt to capture things-in-themselves, and their alleged formal autonomy, to which I will return below. Kahnweiler also uses Kantian terminology to delineate two phases of cubism. The *analytic* phase, that upon which I focus here, involved the analysis of objects into facets, whereas, from 1912 on, the goal of *synthetic* cubism was not the depiction of objects in the world, but the creation of new aspects of reality. *Tableau-objets* were created using collage and papier collé; the latter are canvases to which pasted paper is added, whereas collage includes a wider range of materials such as, in Picasso's

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<sup>6</sup> Semiotic interpretations of cubism take cubist pictures not to represent via resemblance, but via arbitrary signs. This is not a convincing interpretation of analytic cubism given the clear, albeit fragmented, appearances that are presented. It is, though, a more plausible interpretation of synthetic cubism, as suggested by Gertrude Stein: 'From 1914 to 1917 cubism changed to rather flat surfaces, it was no longer sculptural, it was writing' (1938, p. 39). For a sophisticated account of the semiotic interpretation, see Florman (2017), who argues that cubism does not involve a 'full-blown (non-iconic) language', just the 'promise' of one (p. 54).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gris: 'A picture with no representational purpose is to my mind always an incomplete technical exercise, for the only purpose of any picture is to achieve representation' (cited in Rosenthal, 1983, p. 66).

works, cane seating, sand, and rubber gloves: paintings of cluttered tables could now include real newspapers.

The Kantian terminology, though, is misleading: it does not mark the semantic distinction that it does in Kant, with analytic judgements true in virtue of the meaning of the terms in which such judgements are couched, as opposed to synthetic judgements which are true in virtue of the nature of the world. Kahnweiler and others have therefore been accused of simply name-dropping, basking, as Cheetham snipes, in the 'cachet that high-powered German metaphysics lends to cubism' (Cheetham, 2001, p. 83).

## **2. Kant's Transcendental Idealism**

Some see cubist works as moving away from fleeting appearances and engaging with a more profound or deep reality, that corresponding to Kant's noumenal world and transcendental things-in-themselves. This is the 'idealist' or 'conceptual' interpretation of cubism, one adopted by various contemporaries of Picasso and Braque, including the art dealer Léonce Rosenberg, poets Pierre Reverdy and Olivier Hourcade, and the critic Maurice Raynal. I suggest, though, that it is not illuminating to think of cubism in this way.<sup>8</sup> In this paper I am focusing, apart from some thoughts

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<sup>8</sup>This is, though, the explicit intention of artists such as Kandinsky and Klee: 'Formerly we used to represent things visible on earth, things we either liked to look at or would have liked to see. Today we reveal the reality that is behind visible things, thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the

on formalism in §5 below, on Kantian interpretations that draw on *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) rather than on those concerning the specifically aesthetic themes in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), such as disinterestedness and free play.

First, it would appear that some of these interpreters have a confused understanding of Kant. Kahnweiler, for example, also related cubism to John Locke's (1689) distinction between primary and secondary qualities: Picasso's aim, he says, is 'to present the primary...qualities as exactly as possible' (1920, p. 12). Lockean primary qualities are those whose existence is independent of the existence of a perceiver, such as shape and size. Secondary qualities such as colour, smell and felt texture depend on the existence of a perceiver and are not possessed by objects themselves: the haystacks that Monet painted at sunset (1890–91) were not themselves golden, but the physical composition of their surface, and the particular way this surface reflects light rays into our eyes, causes in us the experience of seeing this colour. Impressionists painted the fleeting images and plays of light that strike the viewer; cubists, in contrast, can be seen as focusing on primary qualities, those that constitute the volume of objects and the relations between these volumes. Colours were muted—only there to depict form and volume; visual effects, as Lockean secondary qualities, were of little interest. In order to depict this primary reality, Picasso and Braque were not restricted to reproducing the natural effects of light. It was used where it was needed, as one might explore a large sculpture or a building in

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universe and that there are many more other, latent realities' (Klee; cited in Hughes, 1991, p. 304).

the dark with a flashlight; some figures also had an inner light, diffusing out between overlapped planes and facets.<sup>9</sup>

Such a Lockean account, though, is incompatible with the Kantian picture. For Locke, primary qualities such as the shape, size and sculptural form of an object are mind-independent, whereas, for Kant, as we shall see in the next section, these are mind-dependent properties. It is tempting also to see other 'idealist' interpretations in terms of Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities, and not as Kantian. Rivière claims '[t]he true purpose of painting is to represent objects as they really are; that is to say, differently from the way we see them. It tends always to give us their sensitive *essence*, their presence, this is why the image it forms does not resemble their *appearance*' (Fry, 1978, p. 76). In tilting a glass to the viewer the painter represents the objective, circular shape of the object in space, rather than how it appears from a particular perspective. In doing so, it can be said that the focus is on 'reality', the object's 'essence' or the 'thing-in-

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<sup>9</sup> Rivière (1912, pp. 253–6) explains the cubist attitude to lighting: 'Lighting is not merely an accidental mark; it has the effect of profoundly altering forms.... It is therefore possible to say that lighting prevents things *from appearing as they are*.... In short, the painter, instead of showing the object *as he sees it*, that is, disarticulated between light and dark, will construct it, *as it is*, that is, in the form of a geometrical volume, free of lighting effects. In the place of its relief, he will put its volume'. Rivière is similarly insightful with respect to perspective: 'No doubt, reality shows us these objects mutilated in that way. But we can move around in reality: one step to the right and one step to the left complete our vision. The knowledge we have of an object is, as we said, a complex sum of perceptions. The plastic image, for its part, does not move: it must be complete from the first glance. Hence, it renounces perspective'.

itself'. Such terms, though, need not be taken in a Kantian sense; they could merely refer to the objective, primary properties of objects in Locke's sense.<sup>10</sup>

A second reason to reject this idealist interpretation is that, for Kant, things-in-themselves cannot be the objects of experience, nor can we have any knowledge of them or cognitive contact with them. We can only have knowledge of the phenomenal world, the world of our experience, and not the transcendental world from which, presumably, these experiences are derived. Any attempt to depict the noumenal world is impossible.

Third, in later works Picasso adopts a pluralist approach where, within the same work, there are cubist representations alongside naturalistic, traditional ones. This is so, for example, in *Fruit-Dish with Grapes, Glass and Playing-card* (1914) and *Still Life with Fruit-Dish on a Table* (1914).<sup>11</sup> This suggests that cubism does not aspire to *the one true* representation of reality—to a representation of things-in-themselves. The message of these works seems to be that these styles are complementary (Cooper, 1971, pp. 215–17).<sup>12</sup> Braque's trompe l'oeil nail in his *Violin and Palette* (1909)

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<sup>10</sup> Bois (1990, p. 67) notes a parallel tension in Raynal, who interprets cubism in terms of both Kant and Berkeley (1710); Kant, though, attempts to refute Berkeley's idealism in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

<sup>11</sup> See Cooper and Tinterow (1983, pp. 300–2).

<sup>12</sup> See also Amédée Ozenfant, the cubist, and later purist: 'Because Picasso nowadays paints cubist and representational works, it has been falsely claimed that he is giving up Cubism.... Can such people not understand that Cubism and figurative painting are two different languages, and that a painter is free to choose either of them as he may judge it better suited to what he has to say?' (cited in McCully, 1981, pp. 146–8).



draws attention to the contrast between naturalism and cubism, and Rosenberg interprets this as saying that ‘the Cubist means of recording...reality—unlike the means devised by the Renaissance—are not absolute but relative. One pictorial language is no more “real” than another, for the nail, conceived as external reality, is just as false as any of the less illusionistic passages in the canvas—or, conversely, conceived as art, is just as true’ (Rosenblum, 2001, p. 45).<sup>13</sup> This pluralist claim is illustrated in Picasso’s drawing, *The Studio* (1933).<sup>14</sup> In the depicted artist’s studio there are two artistic representations of the same female model, one a broadly naturalistic sketch resting on an easel, the other a balloon-like sculpture sat on a table, the latter in the style of his beach paintings of the 1920s and 1930s.

### 3. Kant’s Empirical Realism

Kahnweiler may be confused about the distinction between the views of Locke and Kant, and his use of the analytic/synthetic distinction may be mere name-dropping; nevertheless, there are other appeals to Kant that are more convincing. He says, for example, that cubism’s

new language has given painting an unprecedented freedom...

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<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of this famous nail, see Rubin (1989, pp. 40–1, 60n86): ‘his nail is a subtle artistic pun, which draws attention to the premises of his Cubist style by alluding to what it is not’ (p. 41).

<sup>14</sup> See Cowling and Golding (1994, fig. 66, p. 90).

coloured planes, through their direction and relative position, can bring together the formal scheme without uniting in closed forms.... Instead of an analytic description, the painter can...also create in this way a synthesis of the object, or in the words of Kant, 'put together the various conceptions and comprehend their variety in our perception'. (Kahnweiler, 1920, p. 12)

Here he is concerned with the creative role of the mind in perception. This is also stressed by other commentators and by *le bande à Picasso* (Picasso's circle of poet and artist friends). Apollinaire claimed that '[c]ubism differs from earlier painting in that it is not an art of imitation, but an art of *imagination*' (Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 20) and that it involves 'the art of painting new structures with elements borrowed not from visual reality but from the reality of *knowledge*' (Cooper, 1971, p. 109). There is a shallow sense in which this is so. Our knowledge of the human body and of traditional ways of depicting this allow us to see, for example, the figure in Picasso's *Standing Nude* of 1910. Such a figure is not in itself 'closed' (see Kahnweiler quotation above)—its form and the space around it interpenetrate; it is, however, 'completed' in the viewer's mind. We have to apply such knowledge to the drawing since the descriptive content of such a work is so minimal.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> It is in this move away from visual appearances and towards the involvement of cognitive capacities that we see one influence of tribal art on cubism. Golding, echoing the now archaic terminology of the cubist epoch, puts it thus: 'As opposed to Western art, Negro art is more conceptual, much less conditioned by visual appearances. The Negro sculptor tends to depict what he knows about his subject rather than what he sees' (1989, p.

There is, though, according to Kant, a deeper sense in which the mind constructs what we see and this, I argue, can provide the basis for a distinct Kantian interpretation of cubism, one not focused on things-in-themselves, but on Kant's empirical realism and his account of the cognitive input that is necessary for our lived experience.

Early modern empiricists such as Locke and Hume saw experience as passive, something that impinges on us. Hume calls such experiences, impressions; the world forming impressions on the mind as a stamp forms an impression in wax. Kant, however, in the 'Transcendental Aesthetic' (1781, A22–49/B37–73), argues that the mind imposes spatio-temporal order on experience.<sup>16</sup> Space and time are not things independent of us; they are preconditions of experience—necessary, a priori, aspects of experience through which we must engage with the world; what Kant calls 'forms of intuition'. Kant has two arguments for this claim. First, the idea of space cannot be derived from impressions (in Hume's sense) since spatiality is already built into our impressions: I see that the glass is to the left of the

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59). Karmel (2003, p. 68) cites Kahnweiler's (1949) thoughts on the creative role of the viewer's mind in relation to a Grebo tribal mask: 'The volume of the "seen" face is inscribed nowhere in the "true" mask, which provides only the outline of this face. The volume is seen somewhere before the real mask. The epidermis of the seen face only exists in the consciousness of the viewer who "imagines" or creates the volume of the face in front of the plane surface of the mask'. Picasso owned two Grebo masks (see Rubin, 1984, p. 307).

<sup>16</sup> 'Aesthetic' is used here to refer to the sensible or experiential representation of objects in general (cf. anaesthetic) and not in the contemporary sense that refers only to art and art objects.

newspaper. Second, I can think of space with objects removed, but I cannot think of the absence of space; representation of space is thus prior to representation of objects (ibid., A23–24/B38–9). Further, in the ‘Transcendental Deduction’ (ibid., A95–130/B129–69) Kant argues that experience must also correspond to the ‘categories’—certain fundamental ways of conceiving of the world. We have no choice, for example, but to see the world in terms of enduring substances in causal relations to each other. In what follows I will focus on the ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’ and the spatial structure of experience.

Commentators on cubism gesture towards such an account: ‘The arrangement of bottles and fishes [in Braque’s *Still Life with Fish on a Table*, 1911] is not embedded in a spatially recognizable background.... Spatial integration of the objects in the picture develops only in the viewers’ minds’ (Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 42). The viewer fuses multiple views into a single image, reconstructing objects from dislocated facets, bringing to bear their conceptual understanding of those objects. Braque, in his 1917 *Thoughts and Reflections on Art*, says ‘[t]he senses deform, the mind forms’ (cited in Versteegen, 2014, p. 295), and a more developed description of the constructive role of the mind is given by the cubist sculptor, Archipenko: ‘One can say that Cubism had created a new cognitive order in respect of pictures.... [T]he viewer is himself creatively active, and speculates and creates a picture by building upon the plastic character of those objects that are sketched out as forms’ (Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 30). Such constructive effort can be felt as one searches for life in the more difficult canvases, those not readily decipherable to the untrained eye. The claim is

not that cubist works have distinctive features that trigger such Kantian synthesis; for Kant, all experience has this structure: apprehending a teapot actively involves forms of intuition and the categories. The teapot does not sit there in space that is independent of observers, waiting to be seen. Space, rather—and thus volume—is a precondition of experience—a feature imposed on experience by the mind of the viewer. The claim is that cubist works can make us aware of such acts of synthesis, and therefore that such an account of visual experience can be seen as one of the subjects of these works.<sup>17</sup> Cubists are not alone in this, of course, and Cezanne, divisionists such as Seurat and Signac, and impressionists all have this goal, but the claim here is that the self-reflexivity of cubism's form of modernism is Kantian in flavour.

I will discuss two potential objections to my interpretation. First, one concerning a distinct account of what Kant means by things-in-themselves; second, a reason to think that such a Kantian approach could not have been intended by the major cubists.

#### **4. The Two-Aspect Interpretation of Transcendental Idealism**

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<sup>17</sup> For Kant, such synthesis is also the foundation of self-awareness. Kant argues that self-consciousness—or the 'unity of apperception' (1781, A106–8)—is grounded in acts of synthesis: I become aware of myself as I synthesize spatio-temporal intuitions into, for example, the experience of seeing someone descending the stairs. Perhaps, then, cubism not only makes manifest the active cognitive input that we bring to experience, but also the very existence of our selves. One does not lose oneself in a cubist picture; one finds oneself.

The idealist interpretation of cubism that I discussed in the previous section assumes what is called the 'two-object' view: there's the spatio-temporal objects of experience and also transcendental or noumenal objects that are not located in space and time. Cubist works are seen as attempting to depict the latter or as enabling us to comprehend the noumenal. There is, however, another interpretation of what Kant has in mind by things-in-themselves. This is Allison's (1987) 'two-aspect' view. According to this, we have two ways of conceiving of objects: in spatio-temporal terms, as they are experienced, and also as objects-in-themselves, shorn of the spatio-temporal properties that our mind imposes on them. According to this view, there is just one set of objects conceived in two distinct ways, and not an accompanying mysterious world of noumenal objects.

A 'two-aspect' interpretation of cubism is suggested by considering the density of the clustering of facets across a cubist work. There are areas, often 'seeded', as it were, by an attribute, where facets form recognizable objects, and there are impenetrable areas of the canvas where it is difficult to discern such features. We can talk of the former as resolved parts of the canvas and the latter as unresolved. These distinctive regions illustrate the two distinct aspects of objects central to the two-aspect interpretation. Cubist works can be seen as concerning the familiar objects of experience: both, as they are experienced—in the resolved parts of the canvas, and, as they are in-themselves, in the penumbras and regions of unresolved shimmering facets. This would be an idealist interpretation of cubism, one in which the viewer is presented not with depictions of transcendental

*objects*, but with those of the transcendental *aspects* of familiar everyday objects. Such an interpretation is not prey to some of the problems discussed above. On this view, for example, there is a sense in which things-in-themselves can be experienced (one aspect of them, at least).

My interpretation differs from this two-aspect reading. I am claiming that cubist works bring to our attention the acts of synthesis involved in perception—*this is their subject*, and not the transcendently-ideal aspects of the objects of experience. I suggest that my interpretation is more plausible. First, consider the regions of the paintings where facets form familiar objects of experience. According to the two-aspect interpretation, the depicted facets should be seen as, as it were, *falling or shearing away*, revealing the transcendental aspects of such objects; according to my interpretation, the facets should be seen as participating in the *construction* of the spatio-temporal objects we come to see. The latter description chimes more with my experience of looking at these works. Second, the explicit pronouncements of some cubists lend some support to my interpretation. We saw above that Braque and Archipenko focus on the constructive role of the mind and not on transcendental objects, either as construed according to the two-object or two-aspect interpretations.

## 5. 'Picasso Never Spoke of Kant'

Such consideration of the explicit statements of the major cubists can suggest a second objection to my empirical realist interpretation of Kant. Braque's rather opaque comment concerning the creative role of the mind

may be suggestive ('the senses deform, the mind forms'), but further consideration of the intentions of Picasso and Braque may be thought to undermine all Kantian interpretations of their work. According to Paul Crowther: 'the internal structure of Cubist works should not even be linked analogically to Kant's "synthesis of apprehension"—unless we have external documentary evidence to show that the artist intended his...representation to be thus construed' (1987, p. 198). We do not have any such evidence. In fact, it is highly unlikely that Picasso and Braque read Kant or that they had anything but a very rudimentary understanding of his works. Kahnweiler, questioning the veracity of Francoise Gilot's (1964) account of life with Picasso, asserts that 'Picasso never, never spoke of Kant or Plato' (Ashton, 1972, p. xxvii). Both his partner during the cubist years, Fernande Olivier, and Gertrude Stein attest that Picasso did not read much at all, apart from, perhaps, some of the poetry of his friends (Rubin, 1989, pp. 54–5). Further, both Picasso and Braque explicitly stated that they were not driven by philosophical or theoretical concerns and Picasso, in particular, seemed to delight in obfuscating his intentions when directly asked about his work—or, as Cocteau (1956, p. 93) put it: 'He never dissected the doves that came out of his sleeves'.

Crowther's claim, though, is too strong and not very plausible, as I will go on to argue. A plausible position with respect to the relation between an artist's intentions and knowledge and the meaning or subject of their art would seem to occupy the middle ground between Crowther's claim and that of Beardsley and Wimsatt (1946) who argue that the intentions of the artist are not relevant to judgements concerning what the work means or



what it is about. I myself have searched biographies and interviews with Picasso to find mention of Kant. What if I had been successful—what if I had fallen upon a well-thumbed copy of *The Critique of Pure Reason* in one of David Douglas Duncan's wonderful photographs of Picasso's home and studio, *La Californie*?<sup>18</sup> This would surely add credence to one or other Kantian interpretations of his work. However, according to Beardsley and Wimsatt, if Picasso had been successful in his intention to depict Kantian themes, then they would be there to be seen in the work, regardless of the existence of such a photograph. If, on the other hand, he were unsuccessful, and his reading of the critique never came through in his work, then he would have failed in his intentions and such a photograph would merely be a record of a failed project. There is, however, middle ground between these two views concerning the relevance of artists' intentions to the meanings of their works. Instead of limiting consideration to the explicit intentions of the artist, we can consider wider aspects of the creative process. Knowledge of these may illuminate the works. An artist—Picasso, perhaps—could have a sharper awareness than most of us of his own perceptual mechanisms and the synthetic activity of his own mind. That is at least an open possibility. The artist's representations of what and how he sees could therefore manifest features of perception that we rarely notice, but are those that are explained by scientific, psychological or philosophical theory. It may also be the artist's intention to express their perceptual insight in their works even though they do not have knowledge of the relevant theories. Picasso

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Duncan (1980).

could thus portray Kantian synthesis without having read a word of Kant.

I have considered various ways that interpreters have taken cubism to be Kantian in its approach. It has been seen in terms of the analytic/synthetic distinction and transcendental idealism. I have rejected both interpretations, but suggested an alternative interpretation in line with Kant's empirical realism. Lastly, I shall relate this interpretation to formalist interpretations of cubism—formalism derived from Kant's (1790) account of beauty in his *Critique of Judgment*. Formalist interpretations of cubist works limit their aesthetically-significant properties to the planes, lines and muted colours on the surface of the canvas. Roger Fry offered an early influential account of this kind: cubists 'do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life.... The logical extreme of such a method would undoubtedly be the attempt to give up all resemblance to natural form, and to create a purely abstract language of form—a visual music; and the latter works of Picasso show this clearly enough' (Rubin, 1989, p. 406). However, the richness of these works belies such interpretations. Abstract art may be limited to such formal properties, but, as we have seen, cubism is not abstract: it can therefore be judged on how well it captures the atmosphere of the café or the character of a person, as, by all accounts, he evidently did in his portraits of the art dealers Ambroise Vollard (1910) and Wilhelm Uhde (1910). To understand cubism one also has to be aware of its subversive role with respect to Renaissance perspective, and its relation to a roll-call of artists through the ages to which Picasso, in particular, makes reference: Cézanne, El Greco, Courbet and Ingres, to name but a few. Further, I have suggested here that these works

concern the process of seeing and Kantian conceptions of this. Cubist works do have a distinctive form, one that at times offers a kind of shimmering beauty—a ‘prismatic magic’: ‘As cubism evolves, Picasso presses his analysis beyond the study of volumes to the point at which it becomes “a melodius fabric of lines and tints, a music of delicate tones—lighter or darker, warmer or cooler—whose mystery increases the pleasure of the viewer”’ (Rubin, 1989, p. 44). In addition to this form, though, there is multi-faceted content: a certain work can depict the bohemian world of zinc bars in Paris at the start of the last century, art-historical themes concerning perspective and the norms of realism, and philosophical theories concerning vision and the role of our cognitive faculties in experience.

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