

Administering Picasso

The contemporary museum experience is administered and managed. Major exhibitions are organized around the titans of 'modern' art to attract the masses to the temples of consumerism for the cultivated. Preference is given to the 'genius' figures whose singular trajectory and talent attest to an individual originality we are called to adulate. Tickets are expensive and often need to be reserved in advance. The galleries are packed, and the public is ushered through a congested narrative of heroic creativity. In the isolated world of individualized information, which takes its extreme form in the obligatory headsets explaining what is being seen, we are—in a swarm of other people—invited to privately identify with the iconoclastic beauty of the heroic genius. Our individual experience is administered in such a way as to have us conform to the social imaginary of radical individuality at the precise moment at which we are but one more wandering headset in an endless sea of headsets (all subject to the same administered experience of individuality). At the end of this edifying process of cultural elevation and the massification of individuality, we are churned out into the museum shop so that we can purchase the imperturbable signs of our privately shared originality.



The recent exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Picasso and the Avant-Garde in Paris*, is no exception. It is structured by a running narrative of artistic innovation opposing the "fundamental assumptions of Western art since the Renaissance" to the iconoclastic virtuosity

of an artistic *toro*. Through a structured chronology of linear development, we follow Picasso as he pushes the envelop of art history by repeatedly calling into question the norms of representation. His work in analytic and synthetic cubism, his sculptural experiments and collages, his encounters with Surrealism, all teach us the same basic lesson: Picasso broke with representation and drove history in the direction of anti-representational art. The audio and printed commentary is replete with the savvy omniscience of those who—like us—can now snicker at the idea that cubism used to be affiliated with the 'more representational' work of Jean Metzinger, or that Joaquin Valverde Lasarte's highly representational *The Hunters* (1931) was considered in its day to be as revolutionary as Picasso's *Three Musicians* or Léger's *The City*. The message is clear: we *now* know what is *truly representative* of the most important artistic developments in recent history: Picasso's anti-representational experiments.



It is subtly ironic that the narrative of anti-representation, which seeks to establish a linear history of artistic iconoclasm, is always a representational narrative. In other words, the glorification of anti-representation is embedded in a narrative that is such a part of the representational tradition that it is not even aware of it! There is therefore something disturbingly hollow about its embrace of anti-representation, as if it were acceptable as long as it could be explained, situated, and analyzed in such a way that it can be institutionalized, commercialized and administered. Ultimately, as we wind our way through the final rooms of the exhibit, we realize how bankrupt this narrative is. In one of the most interesting and revealing rooms, the spectator is told that

Picasso's "return to figuration in his neoclassical period of the 1920s can be linked with the cultural backlash



against Cubism, although the artist never viewed his groundbreaking earlier work as progressing away from classical ideals, despite its revolutionary appearance." This apparently opens a space for a critical reevaluation of Picasso's work in terms of his engagement with classical ideals and his attempt to articulate a new relationship to the past (instead of simply breaking with it). However, this space is immediately closed down as we are told that Lasarte's *The Hunters* is much more representative of the 'return-to-order' movement. Nonetheless, the anti-representational narrative trips at this point and can only stumble to the finish line. And what a finish line it is! For the last room is dominated by a sculpture whose title is as "representational" as its content: *Man with a Lamb*.



If we are able to bracket this administered narrative of artistic innovation and the social imaginary it perpetuates in the minds of all of those exposed to it, there are nonetheless many positive elements that should be highlighted. The works on view are an impressive selection of some of the most valorized works in the art historical archive, along with an assortment of work by figures who have been more or less written out of history (due in part to narratives such as the narrative of anti-representation). The photographs also add an interesting vitality to the exhibit, and they help create a sense of the social dimension of the avant-garde. Indeed, the moments when the march of innovation is interrupted by a contextualisation of various social circles are extremely refreshing antidotes to the naiveties of linear history. And the attempt to weave art history into the history of cafés, friendships, jazz performances and more or less formal salons needs to be lauded. Ultimately, the P.M.A. has a strong pedagogical agenda that can be extremely beneficial, as evidenced as well by the last Cézanne exhibit. Pedagogy, however, when it is made to be the handmaiden of administered historical narratives and commercialization, can only lead to the reification of debilitating social imaginaries. If the P.M.A. truly wants to praise iconoclasm and anti-representation, why doesn't it begin by *breaking with its own representational narratives?*

- Theodore Tucker

