

51. *Counter-composition*, by Theo van Doesburg, 1924–25. Gouache, 50.7 by 50 cm. (Centraal Museum, Utrecht; exh. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo).

paintings. Given the sheer range of Van Doesburg's activities, that was never going to be an option here. If the show in The Hague reinforced the image we have of Mondrian as restrained and semi-monastic, this exhibition gave us Van Doesburg the bombastic frontman, the experimenter, the restless character who got on everybody's nerves.

The frustration of not being able to follow the trajectory of any one of Van Doesburg's activities without the interference of another was exacerbated by the division of the exhibition over two sites. The years until 1922 were on display at the Centraal Museum, Utrecht, while the period in Paris from 1923 until Van Doesburg's death in 1931 could be found at the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo. Chances are that a large number of people will have seen only one half, or the two parts out of sequence – which makes one wonder how important the narrative of the exhibition might have been in the first place. Tracking Van Doesburg's individual development is a difficult procedure and it might have been worth devising an arrangement free of a constraining chronology.

When the show was being planned several years ago, it was suggested that it would be something like the André Breton exhibition held in Paris in 1991, giving an opportunity to see Van Doesburg in a different light, as a theorist, a facilitator and a propagandist. This was partly promised by the introductory panel in Utrecht which stated that Van Doesburg 'wanted to control the international avant-garde scene of his day like a spider at the centre of its web'. The difficulty of the original scheme was obviously that, unlike Breton, Van Doesburg did have a career as an artist and to include the works of all those he knew, promoted or

collaborated with would inevitably lead to comparisons being made. Certainly in the Utrecht section, the curators were very careful to keep a safe distance between Van Doesburg's paintings and a small selection by Mondrian, Vilmos, Huzsar and Bart van der Leek displayed in a balcony space above the main exhibition area. In Otterlo works by other artists were far more evenly scattered but on the whole direct juxtapositions were avoided.

Unfortunately there is no accompanying catalogue which might have clarified the exhibition's rationale. Instead, an *œuvre* catalogue is being published to coincide with it, although it was still unavailable at the time of my visit.<sup>2</sup> This indicates the lack of will that exists in The Netherlands to make a significant reinterpretation of Van Doesburg. The publication of this book, timed to follow hard on the heels of the Mondrian catalogue raisonné, indicates that he should be considered to have an *œuvre* in the traditional sense that a painter might. The chaotic arrangement of the exhibition suggests something very different: it constantly shows moments where Van Doesburg abandoned one medium in favour of another. The Utrecht section finished with a room in which only two Van Doesburg paintings were on display, alongside many works produced by students at the Bauhaus who followed his *De Stijl* course. We restarted in Otterlo with a room full of Dada objects including works by Schwitters and Picabia. The rest of the exhibition was dominated by architectural drawings featuring colour designs. This does not seem to me to be the obvious pattern for someone who was, as the exhibition leaflet tells us, 'a painter in heart and soul' nor does it add up to the fulfilment of a particular goal.

Even in the presentation of Van Does-

burg as a painter, certain omissions were unfortunate. The most significant set of paintings of the latter part of his career are the eleven *Counter-compositions* made between 1924 and 1926, eight of which were included in the Otterlo section (Fig.51). With only a few extra loans we could have seen the entire group together, something not achieved before. Notably missing were the Tate Gallery's *Counter-composition VI* and Peggy Guggenheim's *Counter-composition XIII*. Similarly 'Arithmetic Composition', which had been in the 1968 exhibition, was missing from the final room displaying *Art Concret*, although it is the only painting Van Doesburg ever made which fulfils the criteria he set out for concrete rather than abstract art. We were left with only the preparatory sketches for it.

Perhaps the most interesting thread running through the exhibition was the image of Van Doesburg himself. Not only were there the huge photographs of him already mentioned but a sequence of self-portraits ran from his earliest years through to the very end, often unfinished works not intended for exhibition or public consumption. Their placement from room to room ensured some continuity amidst the otherwise impenetrable twists and turns and demonstrated an unexpected anxiety concerning his identity that neatly paralleled the exhibition, as the shift from one medium to the next, the constant formulation and rejection of styles and theories destabilised our image of him. While such access to his most personal moments has only been made possible because of the legacy of Nelly van Doesburg, until somebody dares to challenge her version of his career, Van Doesburg will not be interpreted for a new audience.

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<sup>1</sup>The speech given by Cor van Eesteren at the opening of the 1936 Van Doesburg retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum tried to give an overview but ultimately fell back on Van Doesburg's personality as the only explanation for his varied production ('Opening tentoonstelling van Doesburg, Stedelijk Museum 1936', MS, Van Eesteren Archive, NAI, Rotterdam).

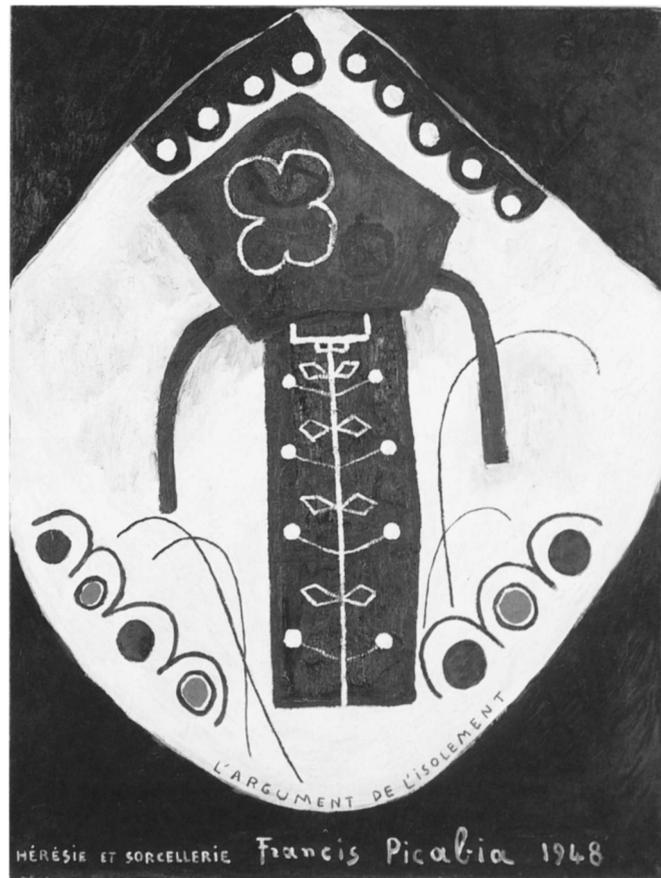
<sup>2</sup>*Theo van Doesburg (Œuvre)catalogus*. Edited by E. Hoek. (Centraal Museum, Utrecht, and Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, 2000). ISBN 90-6868-255-5.

### New York and Cologne Picabia

The vogue for Francis Picabia's once despised later works seems set to outlast the fashionability of much of the 1980s 'new figuration' that was indebted to him and contributed to his reputation's revival. The exhibition of his paintings, dating from the 1920s to the end of his life, recently in New York at Michael Werner's new space on 77th Street, (closed 10th June), and currently at **Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne** (to 29th July), features over forty works, mostly oils, several of them major pieces. The gallery (which represents several artists associated with the figurative revival of the 1980s) has had a long association with the artist, and works in the current show have



52. *Les Acrobates*, by Francis Picabia. 1926. Water-colour on paper, 86 by 73 cm. (Michael Werner, New York; exh. Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne).



53. *Hérésie et sorcellerie*, by Francis Picabia. 1948. 116 by 89 cm. (Michael Werner, New York; exh. Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne).

been loaned to the various museum exhibitions of recent years marking Picabia's post-modern apotheosis, notably the 1997 retrospective at the Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon.<sup>1</sup>

As with so much revisionist art history, there has been a tendency to revive Picabia's post-Orphist and post-Dada work wholesale, where once it was wrongly dismissed wholesale. The sceptical post-modern ethos into which he has been assimilated, and of which he is seen as a godfather, also discourages discriminating criticism and exegesis of his paintings by its celebration of the relative and the arbitrary. The text in the catalogue to this show<sup>2</sup> is by the very *au courant* critic Dave Hickey and, sophisticated as it inevitably is, celebrates Picabia as the ever-elusive liberator, the hero of creative irresponsibility, presager of later artists' infatuation with the 'off hand' liberation from meaning.

The present exhibition, however, perhaps provides an opportunity to begin some specific interpretative reading of individual works, and to discern the better examples of Picabia's 'transparencies' of the 1920s and 30s, his pornography-derived nudes of the 1940s, and his curiously primitivising abstracts and abstract-figurative hybrids of the later 40s and early 50s.

The technique of the 'transparencies' is to overlay two or more usually partial and fragmentary images, rendered in line and/or in diaphanous washes. Heads and bodies are favoured, often with art-historical allusions – a classical Roman flavour, a Botticelli-like grace, a Byzantine stylisation. Occasional plant, animal and landscape

elements add to the mix. The effect is always initially compelling at a level of visual puzzle, but frequently resolves into a pleasing, pungently associative chaos before the viewer can bother to discern any narrative or other logic. These works can be easily read as standing for a dream-like confusion of signification itself, illustrations of a popularised Saussurean notion of slippery semantics. Picabia's repeated use of divergently squinting eyes, and other distortions of rendition that take on the look of genetic warpage, often lend an atmosphere of hysteria or delirium as a possible 'explanation' for the intoxicated incoherence of the world depicted. In the best works, though, such as *Les Acrobates* of 1926 (cat. no. 1; Fig. 52), the interplay of separate layers is actively orchestrated, so that limbs, for example, read as belonging now to one figure, now another. A mercurial dynamism results that chimes with the ambiguities of narrative. Are these figures in combat or dance, and what is their gender? (The wickedly positioned cleavage of the buttocks of one figure 'feminises' the facing figure, with its suggestion of a breast and its illusion of spread legs when read in combination with the underlying archer image.) The fluid rotating and interlacing rhythms, the strong centripetal forces and the opposition of compositional thrusts to left and right, all serve to make this a sustaining image of androgyny and of at once idealised and anti-idealised corporeality.

The photo-derived nudes and 'glamour' imagery again often offer generalised pictorial/philosophical 'effects', but sometimes distinguish themselves as individually memorable and enigmatic meshings of visual

form and meaning. The proto-conceptual gesture of translating kitsch photography into the high-art medium of oils creates a predictable frisson, and this is enhanced by strategies such as creating exaggerated craquelure (no. 18) or excessively thick and yellowed varnish (no. 31). The wartime *Portrait d'un couple* (no. 28) must have been a sourly wry comment on propaganda, showing a bland pair gazing with anodyne contentment against a backdrop of youthful lovers wholesomely cavorting amid cherry blossom in a bright idyllic future. But the enduring images are those in which the very means of rendition becomes charged and is somehow interrogated, as in *Nue de dos* (1942–44; no. 35). Here Picabia critiques a whole genre of paintings of the model's back: Derain was one obvious practitioner, but his too were quite conscious exercises in convention; there were less self-aware versions of the image by almost every 'Art Vivant' figure painter from Kisling to Coubine to Gimmi to Puy to the young Fautrier. In Picabia's reworking, the evident photographic source, the unapologetically mechanical light, and the contemporary (rather sluttish) face, all help to pitch the work very uneasily as a cultural artefact. And yet the modulations of skin and the rhythms of the body's structure (note the dynamic compositional 'slashes' along the spine, under the forearm and from hip to armpit) somehow refuse to allow this image to cease to be a 'good' painting. Questions of virtue and virtuosity are loaded here, in more than token ways and in genuinely painterly terms, not merely as conceptual strategy.



54. *Masque*, by Francis Picabia. 1949. 60 by 73 cm. (Michael Werner, New York; exh. Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne).

Among the late, thick abstracts and semi-abstracts, finally, are some of Picabia's most vital works. In many he plays with ideas of the arcane, while never seeming to subscribe to them; his interest is rather, *per se*, in the possibilities of abstraction holding meaning, of whatever kind. One work here, *Hérésie et sorcellerie* (no.39; Fig.53) has Kandinsky-like diagrammatic lines, elements and near symbols, but Picabia nurtures for its own sake a greater ambiguity than is found in Kandinsky. There are board-game and playing-card connotations, tribal or aboriginal references, whimsical, pattern-making indulgences, exploitations of basic design ploys (symmetry, shapes bursting out of the frame) to create impact. The best example here of the late impastes is easily *Masque* (no.6; Fig.54), for the way it fuses the emblematic with the seemingly contingent, and subsumes fiendish humour and caricature into a mesmerising pictorial configuration unified by a strange raking sidelight. The painted-out face covered with flower motifs still looms under the surface, not only as physical pentimento, but as an illusion of mass created by the way the flower pattern seems to be in light or shadow. The detached ear and the lipstick-painted mouth speak of whispered secrets or threats; there is seduction, necromancy, and even necrophilia in the air.

While totally jettisoning the idea of pre-planned, constructed subject painting, Picabia never lost his fascination with content. The notion that he stands for the negation of meaning would be quite misplaced; rather he sees painting as a kind of machine for generating meaning. His best work distinguishes itself by the particularity of the meanings created, and the way it permits us to witness the process of their emergence.

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<sup>1</sup>Catalogue: *Anthology: Francis Picabia*. By Pedro Lapa, Arnaud Pierre and Carole Boulbès. 207 pp. with 175 col. pls. (Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon, 1997). ISBN 972-8176-35-X. For a discussion of other recent Picabia publications and exhibitions, see this Magazine, CXXI [October 1999], p.629.

<sup>2</sup>*Francis Picabia*. Essay by Dave Hickey. 56 pp. with 42 col. pls. + 1 b. & w. ill. (Michael Werner, New York and Cologne, 2000), \$20. ISBN 1-885013-18-3.

### Basel Cy Twombly

Cy Twombly lets his materials alone in a way that is almost unprecedented. A statement so sweeping has suddenly become possible now that his sculpture has been made visible in a way that for the first time does justice to its originality. Twombly began making sculpture in 1946, stopped in 1959, and resumed in 1976, since when he has made a few pieces each year. Most of the works included in *Cy Twombly Die Skulptur* (at the **Kunstmuseum, Basel** to 30th July)<sup>1</sup> date from the second phase, and they follow on so logically from the earlier pieces – ten of which are shown here – that the long hiatus which separates them is not immediately apparent. The materials are essentially the same: wood, found objects and white paint. In the later work, plaster, which sometimes looks as though it has been squeezed out of a giant nozzle, becomes an essential component. Other materials include sand, cloth, wire, twine, webbing, nails, metal strapping, paper and wax. The sculptures are invariably painted or partially painted in white pigment and are rarely composed of more than five or six elements. There is little or no evidence of a sculptor's tools. A carpenter's tools maybe, but the

sawn-off edges of wood and hammered nails are interventions that usually turn out to be as old as the history of a particular plank, lid or crate.

Katharina Schmidt and Paul Winkler both have a profound knowledge of Twombly's sculpture, and their decision not to include paintings and to concentrate on the wood and plaster originals is triumphantly vindicated. (The sixty-six sculptures selected in collaboration with the artist include half a dozen bronzes and four small works in baked clay.) The exhibition is being shown on the second floor of the Kunstmuseum where the modern collection usually hangs. Following an ambitious programme of renovation, the walls of these beautifully proportioned spaces have been stripped of the old fabric that had been there for years and painted with a subtly adulterated white, a colour that is at once neutral and full of character. The top lighting is another bonus as Twombly's white sculptures respond to the gentle variations of natural light as keenly as his paintings. Crucially, there are no barriers around the sculptures, or in front of them, no plexiglass and no cases. Instead, an electronic alarm system hidden inside the plinths deters the visitor from approaching the works too closely. These are immensely fragile works, but the fragility is a part of the experience, which is why it is essential not to cage them or otherwise hinder the directness of the contact we have with them. The occasional low-pitched wail from the alarm is a small price to pay for an installation that can only be described as flawless.

Assemblages are, by their very nature, fragile. Think of Boccioni's *Fusion of a head and window* (1911) made of plaster and wood, or Picasso's *Guitar* (1926) made of sackcloth, string, pasted paper, oil paint and cloth pierced by two-inch nails. Twombly's sculpture follows on from where the great innovators of the found object and assemblage left off. Duchamp's objects gloried in the man-made, especially in the machined precision of the modern age from the spanking clean porcelain of *Fountain* to hardware straight off the assembly line. Kurt Schwitters chose objects from the gutter and the junk heap, such as used stamps and tram tickets which – like the newspapers used in



55. *Untitled*, by Cy Twombly. 1992. Wood and plaster, 48.2 by 33.6 by 44.4 cm. (Menil Collection, Houston; exh. Kunstmuseum, Basel).