

OPEN LETTER TO THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

PICASSO / HANTAÏ

February 23, 2013



Pablo Picasso. *Guitar*, After mid January 1914, ferrous sheet metal and wire, 30 1/2 x 13 3/4 x 7 5/8 ins., Museum of Modern Art, New York

The international art world has now learnt that the Georges Pompidou Center is organizing a retrospective of Simon Hantaï to open in May 2013. This development prompts me to write this open letter to you as the custodian of a strongly defined aesthetic vision of modern art based on Cubism, with Picasso as its central protagonist.

Forgive me if I step a little clumsily onto the boat of art history at this moment. I have looked at art history but I decided long ago not to practice it. I have said elsewhere that I think of myself, in so far as visual art is concerned, as a witness to modern art in the post-war period, from a particular vantage point. So bear with me, as I step aboard, if the craft rocks slightly. Should it do so, it will not be that I claim any authority, but simply because I may perhaps have noticed something.

The name of Picasso is ubiquitous and known to all. When it appears in museum catalogues or in publicity for upcoming auctions, it is invoked with quasi-sacred awe. He is widely acknowledged as the greatest artist of the twentieth century. In the words of Anne Umland, curator of the recent, revelatory exhibition *Picasso Guitars 1912-1914* at the Museum of Modern Art, he “irrevocably changed the way we think ...about what can be defined as art”. The name Simon Hantaï, on the other hand, remains at this hour relatively obscure to the wider public. Many would be surprised that I mention it in the same breath as that of Picasso. They would also wonder what call I have to do so in an open letter to the Museum of Modern Art.

However, as I walked around the above mentioned exhibition of Picasso’s assemblage and sheet-metal sculpture, on the theme of the guitar, back in the spring of 2011, I had what indeed felt like a revelation. Underneath the constructive element of this metal sculpture, now recognized as the definitive statement of the transition from Analytic to Synthetic Cubism, with the attendant invention of ‘papier collé’ and collage, lies the creative process of ‘the fold’. For those who are familiar with the work of Simon Hantaï, the European artist of Hungarian birth and French residence from 1948 until his death in 2008 at the age of eighty six, this will trigger a powerful association. It was Simon Hantaï who in 1960, after a long intellectual struggle with the artistic legacy of Jackson Pollock, invented ‘folding as method’ in order to explore, through the practice of ‘automatism’, the unconscious and industrial process. Could it be that there exists a crucial link between Picasso and Hantaï, which captures an insight of the former and projects it into an entirely fresh and original practice of modern art by the latter, in the post-World War Two era? Careful examination of Picasso’s cubism, with a central focus on the Guitar, in light of Hantaï’s ‘folding method’, will yield an answer emphatically in the affirmative.



Pablo Picasso. *Guitar*, after March 1913, collage, 26 1/8 x 19 1/2 inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York



Simon Hantaï. MA3, 1960, 115.5 x 82.5 inches,
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Comparisons of several paintings by Picasso and Hantaï are revealing. First, take a classic example of Picasso's 'analytic' phase of Cubism, such as 'Ma Jolie' in the Modern's permanent collection, with an early folded painting from Hantaï's series of Cloaks, the one in the Pompidou's permanent collection. The formal comparison is striking, is it not? However, they also share a dimension beyond the formal. Both paintings would seem to explicitly identify matter as modern art's point of departure. Of course, these paintings are divided by fifty years and there are differences in treatment. Picasso represents his subject, a portrait, as an object and disrupts its elements in order to reveal a multi-faceted surface reality. Vision manipulates 'the real'. In the Hantaï painting, the artist would seem to lay hold of material as a 'ground', which is then sundered apart. There is also a key difference in how these paintings were made. Picasso's approach to the fold is conducted through conventional painting technique, via mind/eye to hand co-ordination. Hantaï's innovation is to incorporate the fold into a material process.

If we agree that Picasso's 'Ma Jolie' and Hantaï's Cloak explore the 'fold', we should more precisely state that they identify a first step, that of the original 'crease' of folded material by which, it may be said, matter is brought into existence. With the sheet-metal guitar, Picasso, as the specialists recognize, passes to a second 'synthetic' phase. Perhaps, looking back from the vantage point of Hantaï's invention of the 'folding method', we can now see further that Picasso's development from 'analytic' to 'synthetic' cubism, constitutes an 'unfolding' of his subject. While Picasso, after cubism, did not pursue the path of this "unfolding", it will become the focus of Hantaï's painting.

Picasso and Hantaï are also connected in another very significant way. Both are rooted in atavism. The notion of sexual 'cleavage', with the word understood as both separation and adherence between male and female, has to qualify as a constant principle of human life. Again, both Picasso and Hantaï locate it in the 'fold'. Compare Picasso's great 'pre-cubist' masterpiece, the 'Demoiselles d'Avignon' of 1907, here represented by the lower right quarter of the painting, with Hantaï's late black Meun from 1968. There is a strong formal comparison and, again, a significance which goes beyond form.

Between 1960 and 67/68, Hantaï made paintings that were intensely involved with thinking his way through Picasso's influence. Hantaï's attention to Picasso, in fact, goes back at least to the late 1940s. Documentary evidence from surviving letters that Hantaï wrote to friends in Budapest during his early Paris years identifies Picasso, incidentally not Braque, as being on his mind. Further, mention in a 1967 catalog text by Jean-François Revel of the younger artist's reading of John Golding's 1959 classic book on Cubism, published the year before Hantaï invented the 'folding



Pablo Picasso. *Ma Jolie*, 1912, 39.37 x
25.39 ins., Museum of Modern Art,
New York

method', offers confirmation that the concern was central for Hantaï at that crucial juncture. Once Hantaï resolved this influence, as one would expect from an artist of enormous independence and strength of mind, a fundamental difference inevitably emerges. The issue concerns sight and its ideological dominance over the other senses. The intensity of Picasso's eye is legendary and evokes allusion to the notorious 'mira fuerte', or 'forceful gaze', of the 'macho' Catalan man. On the other hand, the story is told of Hantaï that he temporarily lost his vision from diphtheria during childhood. From this experience, stemmed his famous statement: "The problem was: how to vanquish the aesthetic privilege of talent? How to render the exceptional banal? How to become exceptionally banal? The fold was one way to solve this problem. Folding came from nothing. You simply had to put yourself in the state of mind of those who have seen nothing; put yourself in the canvas. (...) One could even go further and paint with closed eyes." This issue of vanquishing aesthetic privilege plays Hantaï into Warhol, but that is another story and I have told it elsewhere.

Picasso's entire oeuvre can be understood as an obsessive gaze upon the 'fold'. He was always seeking to penetrate his subject. Hantaï, on the other hand, pursued the insight of 'synthetic unfolding'. Looking back late in life, he declared: "I have spent my life opening folds". It led to a fresh breakthrough in his 'Studies' of 1969, in which the ground of his painting takes on a new significance. The body emerges from beneath vision. The subject is no longer seen. It sees, or rather feels.

So what is at stake in the relationship between Picasso and Hantaï? One of the great issues in twentieth century art is the passage of the 'figure' into abstraction. An avenue is to be found in the engagement of, first Pollock, and then Hantaï with Picasso, as distinct from the approach of others, such as Kandinsky, Malevich or Mondrian. The guitar is a female human body, but it is also an abstraction. Picasso no doubt understood this well, but he never relinquished



Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (detail), June-July 1907, 8' x 7' 8", Museum of Modern Art, New York



Simon Hantaï. *Meun*, 1968, oil on canvas, 94 x 85 inches. Private Collection



Simon Hantai, *Étude*, 1969, oil on canvas (108 1/4 x 93 11/16 in.) National Gallery, Washington DC. 2012 Acquisition.

the outline of the figure, concerned that in doing so he might lose his subject. Pollock, briefly, did let go, but at what personal cost? Hantai, both intuitively and intellectually, thought the whole matter through. He was able to forthrightly declare that he wanted to “explore the non-figurative consequences of automatism”. His statement, opening the way for the invention of the ‘folding method,’ does not imply abandonment of the figure, but rather it seeks to transform the figure into a new subject. It points up that Hantai’s ‘folding method’ is one of the great aesthetic transformations in the history of modern art.

It is worth noting that Hantai invented the ‘folding method’ in 1960. The year is a milestone. Stella had made his Black paintings over the previous two years and was beginning the Aluminum series. Warhol would shortly begin his silk-screens. All three artists, Hantai, Stella, Warhol, in their different ways, were addressing what would become one of the central concerns of contemporary art in the second half of the twentieth

century: the issue of how the creative process should account for the advent of mechanical production in modern life. It would appear that Stella’s solution was to imitate industrial production by assuming the guise of a house painter. Warhol wanted to identify himself with industrial production through transferring the creative act to a mechanical technique, his famous silk screens. Hantai’s point of view was more complex. With his ‘folding method’, Hantai invents a technique to explore the interaction of mechanical production and biological reflex in which both artist and viewer shift identity.

I hope to have made the case that Simon Hantai’s work is deeply engaged with that of Picasso and that he made a central contribution to the development of modern art in the second half of the twentieth century. If so, it may be asked why he does not receive more attention in the American art world? Why do we embrace Picasso and yet know so little of Hantai, if they are joined in the same project?

Is it possible that we have lost sight of modern art and its distinctive aesthetic in post-World War Two contemporary art? Maybe it is time that we took another look at some of our assumptions about modern and contemporary art. If so, who better to consider than Simon Hantai, an artist who continued to defend the contemporary vitality of modern art up to his death in 2008, and what institution is better suited to take up the task than the eponymous Museum of Modern Art? Consideration of Simon Hantai’s achievement would offer the Museum of Modern Art an opportunity to pursue its mission, by re-engaging with modern art in the post-WWII period.

With all best wishes,

Paul Rodgers