

Rivière, Jacques. "Present Tendencies in Painting." *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1992. 183-87. Print.
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6 Jacques Rivière (1886–1925) 'Present Tendencies in Painting'

The author, a well-known critic, offered an extended and critical discussion of various technical aspects of Cubist representation: again underpinned by philosophical idealization of a profound or true reality distinct from mere appearance. Ironically he concludes the essay by praising more conservative Cubists while criticizing the more thoroughgoing practitioners for pushing their new principles too far. Originally published in the *Revue d'Europe et d'Amérique*, Paris, March 1912, pp. 384–406. The present extract is taken from Fry, op. cit. (Ellipses are integral to the English version.)

One must, I think guard against misinterpreting the uneasiness and the hesitant conviction shown by the cubists. I do not see it as a sign that their vocation is arbitrary, nor do I conclude from it that their inner torments are all in vain.

On the contrary, their perplexity makes me believe that there is in their enterprise something greater than themselves, an overwhelmingly powerful necessity in the evolution of painting, a truth greater than they can see at first sight. They are the precursors – clumsy, like all precursors – of a new art which is henceforth inevitable . . .

My intention is to give the cubists a little more freedom and assurance by supplying them with the deep reasons for what they are doing. True, this will not be possible without showing them how badly they have done it so far.

I The Present Needs of Painting

. . . The 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 sensible *essence*, their presence, this is why the image it forms does not resemble their *appearance* . . .

Let us now try to determine more precisely what sorts of transformation the painter must impose on objects as he sees them in order to express them as they are. These transformations are both negative and positive: he must eliminate lighting and perspective, and he must replace them with other and more truly plastic values.

Why lighting must be eliminated

. . . It is the sign of a particular instant . . . If, therefore, the plastic image is to reveal the essence and permanence of beings, it must be free of lighting effects . . .

Lighting is not only a superficial mark; it has the effect of profoundly altering the forms themselves . . . It can therefore be said that lighting prevents things from *appearing as they are* . . . Contrary to what is usually thought, sight is a successive sense; we have to combine many of its perceptions before we can know a single object well. But the painted image is fixed . . .

What must be put in place of lighting

He [the cubist] has renounced lighting – that is to say, the direction of the light – but not light itself . . . It is enough for him to replace a crude and unjust distribution of light and shade with a more subtle and more equal distribution; it is enough for him to divide up between all the surfaces the shade that formerly accumulated on some; he will use the small portion of shading allotted to each one by placing it against the nearest edge of some other lit surface, in order to mark the respective inclination and divergence of the parts of the object.

In this way he will be able to model the object without having recourse to contrasts, simply by means of summits and declivities. This procedure will have the advantage of marking not only the separation but also the join of the planes; instead of a succession of bright salients and black cavities, we shall see slopes supported on one another in a gentle solidarity. As they will be both separate and united, the exigencies of multiplicity and those of unity will be satisfied at one and the same time.

In short the painter, instead of showing the object *as he sees it* – that is to say, dismembered into bright and dark surfaces – will construct it *as it is* – that is to say, in the form of a geometrical volume, set free from lighting effects. In place of its relief he will put its volume.

Why perspective must be eliminated

... Perspective is as accidental a thing as lighting. It is the sign, not of a particular moment in time, but of a particular position in space. It indicates not the situation of the objects, but the situation of a spectator ... Hence, in the final analysis, perspective is also the sign of an instant, of the instant when a certain man is at a certain point.

What is more, like lighting, it alters them – it dissimulates their true form. In fact, it is a law of optics – that is, a physical law ...

Certainly reality shows us these objects mutilated in this way. But in reality we can change position: a step to the right and a step to the left complete our vision. The knowledge we have of an object is, as I said before, a complex sum of perceptions. The plastic image does not move: it must be complete at first sight; therefore it must renounce perspective.

What must be put in place of perspective

... The elimination of perspective leads quite naturally to this simple rule: the object must always be presented from the most revealing angle ...

It may even sometimes involve more than one viewpoint: sometimes it will display itself as it is impossible for us to see it, with one side more than we would ever discover in it if we stayed still ...

An object can be represented in a profound and perfect way by one only of its parts, *provided this part is the node of all the others* ... A house, if one looks at the point where two roof-planes and two walls meet, is more completely known than if one saw the whole façade and nothing else ...

Perspective is not the only way of expressing depth; nor, perhaps, is it the best way. It does not express depth in itself, directly and explicitly; it can only suggest it by outlining profiles ...

Fortunately depth is not pure emptiness; one can attribute a certain consistency to it, since it too is occupied – by air. The painter will therefore be able to express it otherwise than by perspective – by giving it a body; not by suggesting it, but by painting it as if it were a material thing. To this end he will make all the edges of the object into starting-points for gentle planes of shadow that will recede towards the more distant objects. Where one object is in front of others, this fact will be shown by the fringes of shadow with which its contour will be edged; its form will detach itself from the others not as a simple profile on a screen, but because the strokes delimiting it will be flanges, and because from them shadows will flow towards the background, as the waters of a river fall regularly from a dam. The depth will make its appearance as a subtle but visible recession accompanying the objects; they will hardly appear to lie on the same plane, for between them there will insinuate itself a positive

distancing and separation produced by these small dark slopes. They will be distinguished from each other without needing to alter their real appearance, simply and solely by the sensible presence, between their images, of the intervals which separate them in nature. By embodying itself in shadows, space, which maintains their discreteness in nature, will continue to do so in the picture as well.

This procedure will have the advantage over perspective of marking the connection as well as the distinction between objects; for the planes which keep them apart will also form a transition between them. These planes will at one and the same time repel and bring closer the more distant objects.

II The Mistakes of the Cubists

In spite of appearances, painting has not yet emerged from impressionism. All art is impressionist that aims at representing, instead of the things themselves, the sensation we have of them; instead of reality, the image by which we become aware of it; instead of the object, the intermediary that brings us into relation with it . . .

The cubists are destined to take up the greater part of the lesson of Cézanne; they are going to give back to painting its true aim, which is to reproduce, with asperity and with respect, objects as they are . . .

First mistake of the cubists

From the truth that the painter must always show enough faces of an object to suggest its volume, they conclude that he must show all its faces. From the truth that sometimes it is necessary to add to the visible faces another, which could not be seen except by changing one's position a little, they conclude that it is necessary to add all the faces one could see by moving right round the object and looking at it from above and below.

The absurdity of such an inference does not need any long demonstration. Let us simply remark that the procedure, as understood by the cubists, arrives at a result that is the direct opposite of its purpose. If the painter sometimes shows more faces of an object than one can really see at once, this is in order to give its volume. But every volume is closed and implies the joining of the planes to each other; it consists in a certain relationship of all the faces to a centre. By putting all its faces side by side, the cubists give the object the appearance of an unfolded map and destroy its volume . . .

Second mistake of the cubists

From the truth that lighting and perspective, which act to subordinate the parts to the object and the objects to the picture, have to be eliminated, they conclude that all subordination must be renounced . . . They understand *eliminating perspective and lighting* to mean *sacrificing nothing as secondary*; they take these two ideas as equivalent, as interchangeable. They thus condemn themselves never again to select anything from reality; and since there can be no subordination without selection, the elements in their pictures relapse into anarchy and form a mad cacophony which makes us laugh . . .

Third and perhaps last mistake of the cubists

From the truth that depth must be expressed in genuinely plastic terms – by supposing it to have its own consistency – they conclude that it must be represented with as much solidity as the objects themselves and by the same means.

To each object they add the distance which separates it from neighbouring objects, in the form of planes as resistant as its own; and in this way they show it prolonged in all directions and armed with incomprehensible fins. The intervals between forms – all the empty parts of the picture, all the places in it occupied by nothing but air, find themselves filled up by a system of walls and fortifications. These are new, entirely imaginary objects, thrusting in between the first ones as though to wedge them tight.

Here again the procedure renders itself useless and automatically does away with the effects it aims at producing. The purpose of the painter's efforts to express depth is only to distinguish objects one from another, only to mark their independence in the third dimension. But if he gives to what separates them the same appearance as he gives to each of them, he ceases to represent their separation and tends, on the contrary, to confuse them, to weld them into an inexplicable continuum.

In short, the cubists behave as if they were parodying themselves. By carrying their newly-found principles to the point of absurdity, they deprive them of meaning. They do away with the volume of the object by their unwillingness to leave out any of its elements. They do away with the individual integrity of the objects in the picture by trying to keep them intact. They do away with depth (whose function it is to distinguish one object from another) by trying to represent it solidly . . .

It is, indeed, impossible not to discern already in the work of some young artists a more intelligent and penetrating understanding of cubism. I have directed my criticisms here principally at Picasso, at Braque and at the group formed by Metzinger, Gleizes, Delaunay, Léger, Herbin, Marcel Duchamp. Le Fauconnier, who was a member of it, seems to be freeing himself from it. He may become a fine painter. But it is chiefly towards Derain and Dufy on the one hand, and on the other towards La Fresnaye, de Segonzac and Fontenay, that my best hopes have tended, ever since Picasso, who for a moment seemed near to possessing genius, strayed into occult researches where it is impossible to follow him. Lastly, I shall set apart André Lhote, whose recent works appear to me to announce, with admirable simplicity, the decisive arrival of the new painting.