

THE FORM OF THE VOID

Joseph Henry • Colloque Picasso Sculptures • 24 mars 2016

Of all the primary sources related to Pablo Picasso's monument for the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, one of the more curious is "Picasso sculpteur et les cathedrales" (Picasso sculptor and the cathedrals) by Julio González, a fellow artist working in Paris and a close collaborator of Picasso's from the late 1920s onwards. In this unpublished manuscript written in 1931, González attempts to draw broad comparisons between Picasso's sculpture and the architecture of ancient and medieval Europe. Overall, three paragraphs are dedicated to a project conferred on Picasso: the artist had been tasked with erecting a suitably honorific sculpture to Apollinaire at Paris's famous Père Lachaise cemetery following the poet's death from influenza in November 1918.²

González describes one sculpture originally intended to serve as the monument:

"This original work is a purely sculptural interpretation to its maximum of expression of a spiritual vision of nature, combining organic forms—primordial characteristic of life. So full of fantasy and of grace, so well-balanced, so human, so personal, this work is made with so much love and tenderness in the memory of his dear friend, at the moment he doesn't want to be separated from it, or to think of its being at Père Lachaise in that collection of monuments where people seldom go. He wished that this monument become the reliquary which would keep the ashes of the lamented poet."³

Critical consensus has assigned this comment to Picasso's *Woman in a Garden* from 1929–30, although other accounts have understood it in relation to one or all to a series of maquettes from the fall of 1928.⁴

It seems difficult to understand either of these cases as "so human and so personal," as González describes the monument design. The deconstructed anatomy and avian grimace of *Woman in a Garden* exhibit a minimal degree of intimacy or "tenderness." The forceful flip of the hair, the strong diagonals of the vegetation, and the collapsed core of the figure's body instead convey a sort of anxious dynamism and irrepressible internal velocity. The 1928 maquettes, with their dizzying matrices of intersecting lines and almost dainty figuration seem at pains to demonstrate the ample "love" that Picasso putatively invested in their joint manufacture. The viewer's eye constantly follows the sloping diagonals from one side of the sculpture to the other, never settling on a sense of perceptual touch that could warrant the sentimentality evoked in González's account.

Yet, in the face of close visual analysis, what if we were to take González at his word? What if we were to consider these works, particularly the 1928 maquettes, as emotional objects of devotion, even "reliquaries"? What if we considered the maquettes exactly as designs for a monument to commemorate and memorialize the "lamented poet" Apollinaire, the "dear friend" of the Parisian avant-garde? What if the Apollinaire monument diagrammed, in the words of Sigmund Freud, the "economics of pain" operative in mourning and melancholia?⁵ In posing these perhaps emotionalist questions, I am not after the precise nature of Picasso's relationship with Apollinaire, pre- or postmortem. Rather, I want to consider the Apollinaire monument, specifically as it manifests in

the series of works Werner Spies and Christine Piot label “SP 68” in their catalogue raisonné, as a field of operations that performs the process of loss itself.⁶

In seeking a formal rather than biographical grasp of the Apollinaire monument, I do not mean to ignore the anecdotal evidence for Picasso’s strong friendship with the poet. In particular, I want to stress Picasso’s repeated efforts to actualize the monument in his lifetime. For all the mercurial qualities of Picasso’s career in sculpture, the monument serves as a site of inveterate return, much like Apollinaire’s actual grave in Père Lachaise, which Picasso and his cohort visited annually. I can only sketch an abbreviated chronology of the monument’s long-term development, a chronology elucidated in the pioneering research on the Apollinaire by scholars such as Michael FitzGerald, Christa Lichtenstern, and Peter Read.⁷

Picasso first elaborated designs for the project in notebooks of the mid-1920s, before welding the four maquettes with González in iron wire in October 1928, almost a full ten years after Apollinaire’s death.⁸ Picasso would return, as Read argues, to the morphology of these sculptures after World War II in a large-scale canvas from 1948 titled *The Kitchen* and a series of drawings from November 1955, the same month an actual Apollinaire monument, represented by Picasso’s *Head of Dora Maar*, was installed in Paris’s Square Laurent Prache.⁹ Later in his studio in Vallauris, Picasso expanded two of the maquettes : SP 68 in particular was enlarged twice, probably in the early 1950s and then again most likely in 1962. In the latter enlargement, the work fabricated in steel tubing with the assistance

of local craftsman Joseph-Marius Tiola and painted in light red minium.¹⁰ The larger of the two expansions, SP 68B, was donated to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1972 :that same year, MoMA curator William Rubin commissioned a full-sized version of the Apollinaire monument in Corten steel at around 13-feet tall to be installed in the museum’s sculpture garden.¹¹ Picasso’s consistent efforts toward producing the monument can be viewed alongside the project’s two official rejections :one in 1927 on the grounds of aesthetic disagreement by the committee responsible for erecting the monument and the other in 1963, when a Chicago architecture firm elected to commission a new work from Picasso for a civic monument, rather than work from a 1928 maquette.¹²

In sum, the Apollinaire monument represents the artist’s repeated investment in one project, a professional consistency rarely seen in Picasso’s oeuvre. As Freud would write in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia” with regard to the act of mourning, “it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them.”¹³ If we can understand Picasso’s interest in revisiting the Apollinaire work as libidinal to some degree, can we then detect a commitment by the artist to actualize the monument’s purpose?

Moreover, there is arguably already an internal logic of encounter and return built into the monument, specifically in the form of SP 68. The sculpture itself occasions the performance and re-performance of the dynamics of loss. In what follows, I will consider the sculpture through three formal strategies :figurative

illegibility, the productive application of negative space, and the transitivity between different media, to borrow a term from Hal Foster’s recent review of the 2015–16 *Picasso Sculpture* exhibition.¹⁴

Upon first glance of SP 68, the viewer’s eye processes the initial rhythm and force of the sculpture. It then considers its content. It pauses at what may be the two *puncta* of the image, so to speak. At the object’s summit stands a head, complete with the affectively opaque signifier of a schematized face consisting of three dots in an inverted triangle. At the object’s flanks hang two abstracted arms bent in concavity; doll-like fingers extend in slightly articulated scalloping. Viewed together as framing devices, the head and arms catalyze a series of metaphoric investigations as the viewer constructs a possible body in the sculpture’s center. Does the oblique circle in the middle of the work indicate an anatomical core or torso? Do feet reside at the points where the stabilizing triangles meet the base? Or perhaps by rudely notating the fingers, Picasso allows for a displacement of the arms onto the diverging center diagonals the concavity of the presupposed arms becomes a gesticulation of the wrist along with newly diminutive phalanges.

The monument, I would propose, resists stable identification. And in their disparate efforts at proposing its subject matter, art historians have only proved this point. Possible interpretations have ranged from a parodic take on the fifth-century BCE bronze *The Charioteer of Delphi* to a ship replete with rigging to the simple image of a woman pushing a swing.¹⁵

By merely *prompting* a human form with the face and arms, Picasso solicits identification while ultimately

refusing that identification’s objective. Some thing seems to appear before us. Some thing seems to stabilize in consciousness before it dissipates into its constituent forces and parts. If the sculpture is indeed a monument to a dear friend, that friend only emerges through suggestion, never to fully cohere. The statue disturbs the very operation of mimesis.

Yet what we can call the pathos of abstraction, the disclosure and then withdrawal of the object, is certainly not unique to the Apollinaire monument within Picasso’s oeuvre writ large. We need only think of Rosalind Krauss’s famous discussion of the 1910 *Girl with a Mandolin* (Fanny Tellier) in her essay “The Motivation of the Sign” or the structuring poetics of T. J. Clark’s recent *Picasso and Truth*.¹⁶ But those discussions center on painting as the vehicle behind loss and asymptotic separation. So what is it about the monument’s status as sculpture that assists its commemorative function? The answer to this question seems to reside in the oft-quoted citation from Apollinaire’s own prose text and inspiration for the monument, his *The Poet Assassinated* (“Le Poète assassiné”), first published in 1916. There, Apollinaire describes the murder of his alter-ego Croniamantal, and that character’s subsequent memorialization by Picasso’s alias, a painter titled the Bird of Benin. Toward the text’s finale, the Bird of Benin discloses that he fact also works as a sculptor and proposes to construct “a statue out of nothing.”¹⁷

The cenopath’s end result, according to the narrator, is a walled-in trench, “so that the empty space had

the form of Croniamantal, and the hole was full of specter.”¹⁸ Or, in the original, “le vide avait la forme de Croniamantal.”¹⁹

Viewed in light of Apollinaire’s description, Picasso’s sculpture can be seen as an entity that renders the negative space of implied volume precisely as a positive term. A sense of structural composition emerges when the stabilizing forms of SP 68 are granted virtual solidity: the large rectangle and circles operate in tandem with the implied triangular prisms to form their own sense of planarity and mass. Christian Zervos argued as much in an article for *Cahiers d’art* titled “Projets de Picasso pour un monument,” published in the fall of 1929. He writes:

“Picasso, who had always had the sharpest sense of architecture, knew that the essential truth of a monument is its mass, erected in space like a pyramid. He rightly preferred to press his monument onto space and at the same to penetrate it with space itself. So that instead of entering into an antagonism with space, the monument could live in it.”²⁰

If we once again return to the monument’s commemorative function, we can then see how negativity, absence, and perhaps lack can be inverted to stand as sources of meaning. Loss does not necessarily mean the non-existence of the object.

Yet what could Zervos have identified as the architectural aspects of the monument designs when his available sources were Picasso’s notebook sketches and the 1928 maquettes? If we are to seek out the meaningful play with space Zervos articulates, then it behooves us to push our understanding of SP 68 to include its postwar iterations, particularly the large-scale MoMA work made in 1972—a year before Picasso’s death. In relegating our focus to the maquettes and sketches, as most scholarship on the monument has done, we may be ignoring crucial changes to the work wrought through modifications in scale. Depictions such as those by Brassai in André Breton’s 1933 feature on Picasso in the journal *Minotaure* in fact seem to spatially decontextualize the monument. This visual estrangement is especially evident when contrasted with the photographer’s image of all four maquettes on a shelf in Picasso’s studio on rue La Boétie.²¹

I want to then stress that it is only from the Vallauris expansion of SP 68 onward that the full-stakes of the monument actualize. Instead of being immanently graspable, both haptically and optically, at the small scale of the maquettes, the larger iterations of the monument at times suggest the very dissolution of mass. Within any gaze at the monument from the angle of the base’s shorter sides, the sculpture’s depth collapses and the intersecting vectors and angles undergo a flattening schematization. The center circle assumes a dominant position, neatly framing the dynamic diagonals therein. The receding rectangle and thin arms fold in to ironically present the monument’s abstracted human body as its most coherent and at its most pictorial.

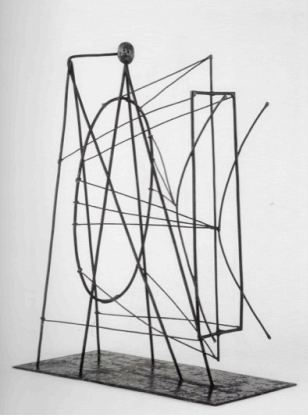
If the very composition of SP 68 obscures the object by virtue of its abstracted figuration, that obfuscation now occurs through ambulation around the freestanding sculpture. As the viewer moves, the form loses fixity at a phenomenological level. In the expansion of the early 1960s, the monument prioritizes somatic solicitation over implied volume.

But the development from internal form to phenomenological relation intensifies as the monument increases in scale in the 1972 MoMA work. In some sense, as the last version of the monument made expressly with Picasso's permission, this work may represent the telos of the Apollinaire project. The basic 1928 design of SP 68 pictorially performs the formalism of loss by indicating an anthropomorphic form that is ultimately unidentifiable. The circa 1962 expansion, at roughly human size, plays with a wavering sense of depth to further obstruct access to any stable quantum of content. In the 1972 incarnation, the viewer's sensorial intake threatens to become all frame, all contour, and all architecture. The work's matrix of lines no longer articulates its own autonomous degree of mass, but is instead made susceptible to the eye's penetration to the world beyond. Instead of creating internal solidity in space, the sculpture pictorializes the world around it. In any image of the monument in the MoMA sculpture garden, the museum's high-rise neighbors exist as framed images. It is almost as if when the Apollinaire sculpture is monumentalized to the highest degree that its cohesion begins to most break down.

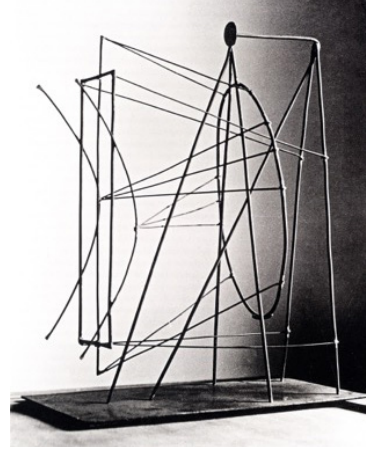
What then, to return to our main points, does the 1972 iteration tell us about the dynamics of loss? If in

earlier treatments the monument presented us with the present absence of the lost object, something more holistic has occurred by the sculpture's last stage. It is not that we must probe for the object in the face of its having-gone, but rather that our very understanding of the world around us must undergo revision. The void becomes less a metaphysical object than a state of subjectivity itself.

My concluding thoughts must query if it is Picasso's sculpture that can optimally work through the transition from object to environment, thing to relation. Is it sculpture as a medium, with its use of real space and responsiveness to scale, that most aptly conveys the dialectics not only of mourning and memory, but of object relations writ large? Is it Picasso's sculpture that questions our very understanding of the objects around us and the structures that hold them in place? Do we now, in fact, need a category of Picasso's *architecture*?



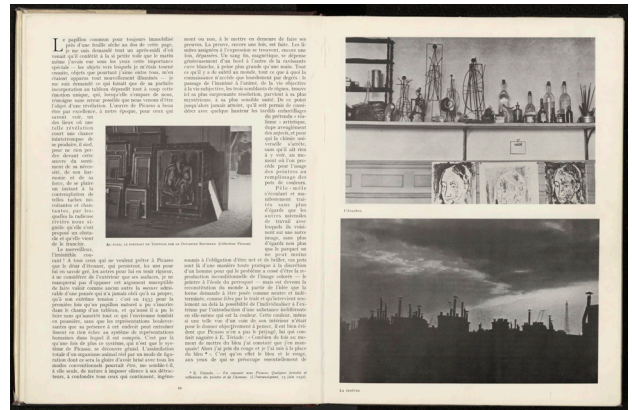
PABLO PICASSO
Figure (proposée comme projet pour un monument à Guillaume Apollinaire), Paris, automne 1928
Fil de fer et tôle, 50 x 18,5 x 40,8 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris.
Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée Picasso de Paris) / Béatrice Hatala
© Succession Picasso, 2016



BRASSAI
Figure (fall 1928). Paris, rue La Boétie, December 1932
Gelatin silver print, 11 3/8 x 9 in. (29 x 22.8 cm)
Musée national Picasso-Paris, Purchase, 1996
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée Picasso de Paris) / Daniel Arnaudet
© Succession Picasso, 2016
© Estate Brassai - RMN-Grand Palais



PABLO PICASSO
Monument. New York, 1972
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
© Succession Picasso, 2016



BRASSAI
Une étagère dans l'atelier de Picasso au 23, rue La Boétie, avec les quatre sculptures Figure (1928), Figure ([1931]), et Head (1928), Paris, 1932
Musée national Picasso-Paris
©RMN-Grand Palais (musée Picasso de Paris) / image RMN-GP
© Succession Picasso, 2016 © Estate Brassai - RMN-Grand Palais

NOTES

Many thanks to Matilde Guidelli-Guidi for all her help and support :this paper would not have been possible without her.

2. For a close account of the monument commission and its politics, see C. F. B. Miller, “Mad Memorials :Picasso’s 1927 Apollinaire Monument Designs and the Politics of Commemoration,” *Immediations* 1 (2004) pp.37–59.

3. Julio González, “Picasso sculpteur et les cathédrales” (1931–32), in Josephine Withers, “The Sculpture of Julio Gonzalez :1926–1942.” PhD diss., Columbia University, 1971, pp.189–190.

4. I consider the catalogue for the recent *Picasso Sculpture* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and Musée National Picasso-Paris to be the most definitive resource on the monument designs. See *Picasso Sculpture*, eds. Ann Temkin and Anne Umland with Virginie Perdriot, Luise Mahler, and Nancy Lim (New York :Museum of Modern Art, 2015), specifically “Around ‘The Monument to Apollinaire’ :1927-1931,” pp.102–131. They understand González’s comments to be directed toward Woman in a Garden. Alternatively, Christa Lichtenstern attributes González’s words to the maquettes in her *Pablo Picasso :Denkmal für Apollinaire :Entwurf zur Humanisierung des Raumes* (Frankfurt am Main :Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988), p.24. On one hand, González’s description does not provide sufficient information to fully identify the work under consideration, yet the section’s subtitle of “1931” in “Picasso sculpteur et les cathédrales” would imply a discussion of work made after the maquette date of 1928.

5. Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement :Papers on Metapsychology*, vol. 14, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud and assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London :The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), p.244. Thanks to Sheehan Moore for first drawing my atten-

tion to the similarities between Picasso’s work and Freud’s theoretical model.

6. Werner Spies, *Pablo Picasso :Das plastische Werk :Werkverzeichnis der Skulpturen in Zusammenarbeit mit Christine Piot* (Stuttgart :Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1983), p.331.

7. See Lichtenstern, *Pablo Picasso*; Peter Read, *Picasso and Apollinaire :The Persistence of Memory* (Berkeley, CA :University of California Press, 2008); and Michael Cowan FitzGerald, “Pablo Picasso’s Monument to Guillaume Apollinaire :Surrealism and Monumental Sculpture in France, 1918–1959.” PhD diss., Columbia University, 1987.

8. For an account of the notebooks and wire maquettes, see Peter Read, “From Sketchbook to Sculpture in the Work of Picasso, 1924–32,” in *Picasso :Sculptor/Painter*, eds. Elizabeth Cowling and John Golding (London :Tate Gallery, 1994), specifically pp.199–201.

9. Read, *Picasso and Apollinaire*, pp.209–216, pp.226–233.

10. *Ibid.*, p.244. For more on Picasso’s collaboration with Tiola, see Diana Widmaier Picasso, “Pablo Picasso’s Sheet-Metal Sculptures, Vallauris 1954–1965 :Design, Materials, and Experimentation,” in *Sylvette, Sylvette :Picasso and the Model* (Bremen :Kunsthalle Bremen, 2014), p.164.

11. For the specifics of this interaction, see Milton Esterow, “Visit with Picasso at Mougins” (includes an interview with William S. Rubin), *Art News* (Summer 1973) :p.46.

12. Read, *Picasso and Apollinaire*, pp.177–179, pp.244–245.

13. Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” p.244.

14. Hal Foster, review of “Picasso Sculpture,” *Museum of Modern Art, New York, Artforum* (December 2015) :<https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201510&id=56245>. Foster writes, “Picasso had few ideas about sculpture, but he made brilliant use of them. One such notion—no surprise here—is the transitivity between pictures and objects.”

15. Respectively, Rosalind E. Krauss, “A Game Plan :The Terms of Surrealism,” in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York :The Viking Press, 1977), p.134; Read, *Picasso and Apollinaire*, p.171; Alan Bowness, “Picasso’s Sculpture,” in *Picasso in Retrospect*, eds. Roland Penrose and John Golding (New York :Harper and Row, 1980), p.89. The first and third identifications are collected in FitzGerald, “Pablo Picasso’s Monument to Guillaume Apollinaire,” p.217. I maintain if the sculpture’s subject matter can be debatable at all, then its abstraction obscures any consensus on meaning. The work’s focus is precisely on the act of recognition as opposed to that act’s product.

16. Rosalind E. Krauss, “The Motivation of the Sign,” in *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, MA :The MIT Press, 2010), pp.242–243; T. J. Clark, *Picasso and Truth :From Cubism to Guernica* (Princeton, NJ :Princeton University Press, 2013), particularly pp.1–22.

17. Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Poet Assassinated*, trans. and ed. Matthew Josephson (Cambridge, MA :Exact Change), p.151. First published 1923 by The Broom Publishing Company. Citations refer to the Exact Change edition.

18. *Ibid.*, p.152.

19. Guillaume Apollinaire, *Le Poète assassiné* (Paris :L’Édition, 1916), p.141.

20. Christian Zervos, “Projets de Picasso pour un monument,” *Cahiers d’art* 4, nos. 8/9 (1929) : p.342. My thanks to Rachel Valinsky for her translation of this passage.

21. André Breton, “Picasso dans son élément,” *Minotaure* 1 (1933) : p.11.