

1-24-2013

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Repository Citation

Schreyach, M. (2013). Fixed Ecstasy: Joan Miró in the 1920s [Review of the book Fixed Ecstasy: Joan Miró in the 1920s]. *caa.reviews*, January 24, 2013. CrossRef DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2013.10

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January 24, 2013

Charles Palermo

Fixed Ecstasy: Joan Miró in the 1920s

University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2008. 282 pp.; 26 color ills.; 37 b/w ills. Paper \$54.95 (9780271029726)



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[CrossRef DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2013.10](#)

The significance of Charles Palermo's *Fixed Ecstasy* for scholarship on Joan Miró, and for modernist studies in general, is undiminished by the fact that after five years its only review appeared in France soon after the book's publication. Palermo's study not only breaks new ground by reevaluating Miró's relationship to Surrealism, but also elucidates the stakes of the artist's commitment to automatism. Encouraged to abandon a narrow view of automatism as a mere technique or as the suppression of conscious control, readers discover it to be a mode of experience that, when represented, evokes effects of continuity and separation between the artist, the fictional world of the work of art, and the beholder. It is essential reading for those interested in Miró and his milieu in the 1920s. It is furthermore indispensable for those concerned with various decisive themes addressed by modernist art and its criticism, including those of embodiment, representation, intention, expression, interpretation, and meaning. The volume thus constitutes a major contribution to the field.

Miró's later connection to Surrealist circles has, over time, dampened an understanding of his prior interests in "allegorizing" his artistic activity in his compositions—interests which, Palermo shows, emerged in tandem with the painter's involvement in an artistic fraternity centered around André Masson's rue Blomet studio in the early 1920s. The group included the writer Michel Leiris, and it forged connections with the circle of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler before attaching itself to the Surrealist movement in late 1924. Becoming involved with the rue Blomet just as he was developing and transforming themes evident in his "detailist" works, Miró began to allegorize his activity as a painter, "project[ing] his work as an artist into the fictional space of his paintings" (2). Palermo demonstrates that Leiris did something similar, and that this literary effort to represent the experience of the self at work, as well as Miró's attempts to allegorize his own image-making activity, amount to explorations of a distinctive mode of representation. Palermo's goal is to elucidate this mode.

The meaning of Miró's automatism is central to Palermo's account. In the early 1970s, the formalist critic William Rubin canonized the already typical view of the artist's automatic techniques when he stressed Miró's procedure of responding to the painted surface as it was being made. In interviews, Miró himself licensed the idea that his compositions emerged spontaneously, without the guide of conscious planning. No wonder, then, that when a cache of preparatory drawings for his paintings of the 1920s was published, this cherished notion of automatism would require substantial revision (Gaëtan Picon, *Joan Miró: Catalan Notebooks. Unpublished Drawings and Writings*, Geneva: Skira; New York: Rizzoli, 1977). Palermo meets the challenge not only through his analysis of archival and visual material, but also by situating automatism historically in pre-Surrealist developments in psychology.

Palermo aspires to see Miró's work not simply on an "empirical" plane, but an "expressive" one, indicating that his study—in contrast to those which use the facts of Miró's cultural background, political sympathies, and his artistic environment as clues to decode the painter's themes—will instead foreground the contingency from which Miró's expressive intentionality emerges. Drawing on the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's view of expressive speech, Palermo understands language not as a "message encrypted in preestablished codes," but as infused with a "silence" that is the tacit presence of an intentionality groping toward

expression. Key to this is automatism, through which Miró achieves a “double stance” toward work. Glossing Merleau-Ponty, Palermo explains: “If one feels oneself to emerge from *inside* one’s writing, to have been continuous with it, and thus recognizes it as something *outside*, as separate from oneself, the writing may then appear, manifest itself, by itself. And that effect—the effect of taking a double stance toward the written or painted object—may convey itself to the reader as well” (16; emphasis in original). Miró’s paintings thematize this drama of continuity and separateness.

Turning in the first chapter (“Calligraphy: Vine and Sundial”) to key works from Miró’s detailist phase (begun in about 1918 and culminating with his masterwork, *The Farm*, of 1921–22), Palermo explains in greater depth how the artist allegorizes his own painterly practice through “calligraphy,” a peculiar crossing-over of the activity of drawing with the objects or phenomena the drawing is meant to describe. For instance, focusing attention in *House with a Palm Tree* (1918) to a frond of the palm tree that becomes a shadow on the face of the sundial, Palermo writes: “The frond that crosses the face of the sundial stands in for, or counts as an example of, the act of marking that produced the sundial—as though the tree made the sundial by projecting or reflecting itself onto the building. That frond might even be taken to replace the shadow that should be telling the time and is otherwise simply missing” (21). The frond, the missing shadow, and the stroke that describes the frond are seen as a network of equivalents that allow Miró to represent his own activity.

Palermo often complements close visual analysis with sustained textual exegesis. His account in the second chapter (“Extension: Toys and Rainbows”) of Robert Desnos’s 1934 essay on Miró provides a good example. Desnos advances the idea that what he sees as the suspension of the fictional present within Miró’s pictures contrasts with the real temporal experience of a beholder. For Palermo, this effect results from Miró’s habit of working from toys, tokens, and miniature models while painting. These surrogates mediate his relationship to the motif, figuring his temporal distance and physical dislocation from it, while also preserving in his memory a direct experience of them. A detail of Miró’s training under Francesc Galí is relevant here. Holding an object behind his back, Miró practiced reproducing the object from the memory of his touch only, translating his tactile experience into a mental image, then into an act of drawing—developing in the process a highly intuitive memory of forms. Miró’s surrogates simultaneously allow him to explore metaphorically the world of the painting and to regard his own marks as the product of an external agent, thereby opening a division within the self, and between the self and the world. Palermo understands the capacity of toys or tokens to “make present and timeless what is far away or past” (53) as contributing to Miró’s creation of a structure of beholding in which identification and distancing are inseparable components. Palermo’s discussion of such a structure in *Still Life with Flowers and Butterfly* (1922–23) merits extended quotation:

[T]he insect seems poised to touch the central motif, as if it were through the butterfly’s delicate antennae that the beholder or painter could imagine touching . . . the flowers. . . . [The butterfly] represents a kind of liveliness unique within its setting, a kind of liveliness that is transformed—I even want to say *intensified*—rather than undermined by the sense of physical stillness its pose might likewise imply. This ambiguity and the unique kind of vivacity it lends the insect as well as the butterfly’s stance toward the central motif make me think that it is meant somehow to represent the beholder’s attitude toward the motif. . . . If one takes up the butterfly as the agent through which one imagines exploring the motif, it at once bridges the distance between the space of the picture and the beholder’s world *and* makes that gap material. (55–56; emphasis in original)

Palermo’s aptitude for description reflects his close study of Michael Fried, whose writings are similarly concerned with how artworks address their beholders. Both scholars, moreover, share an appreciation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, whose writings on embodiment guide Palermo’s discussion of Miró’s *Catalan Landscape (The Hunter)* (1923–24). Focusing on the dotted line encircling the hunter’s body, which seems to suggest its volume without depicting it, Palermo concludes that this line—along with related calligraphic “gestures” that in other pictures similarly seem to continue the feeling of the body into the world around it—represents something like the incorporation of coordinate space by the altogether different space of the body, and conveys the ineluctable *awareness* we have of our own bodies as distinct from, but also continuous with, the world we inhabit. Here, Palermo’s account of Miró resonates with, but is not simply derived from, Fried’s account of embodiment and painting in *Courbet’s Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

In his third chapter (“Stroke: Medium and Compass”), Palermo examines Max Morise’s early essay on Surrealism, “Les yeux enchantés” (1924), in order to show how Miró’s notion of automatism compares with those developing in Surrealist circles. Morise’s theorization of a more nuanced version of automatism enlivens the plainer assumption that it is only another technique for generating novel pictorial forms or for suspending conscious control. Morise’s call, in Palermo’s words, “for a technical procedure that can disappear before it can become the object of the artist’s reflection and yet can make visible certain features of mental life that normally vanish before they can gain recognition” resonates with techniques Palermo finds at work within Miró’s paintings.

Miró both experiences and conveys to the beholder a unique continuity with the space of his paintings. This continuity, Palermo argues in chapter 4 (“Entering Painting’s Thickness: Translucence and Turning”), is what constitutes Miró’s work as a radical

criticism of Cubism, at least insofar as it was understood by Kahnweiler and the critic Carl Einstein. Einstein argued that Cubism, in offering a stationary viewer an image that totalizes and presents simultaneously a range of discontinuous views of a motif, creates a “reality with its own conditions” that necessarily excludes or distances a beholder from the pictorial world (120). It quickly becomes clear that Miró’s mode of experiencing and representing the space of the picture is the antithesis of Cubism’s inaccessibility to embodied projection. The painter’s “translucent” surfaces do not resist the viewer’s attempts to imagine “entering painting’s thickness,” as the title of the chapter indicates (112). Palermo describes the effect of the background brushstrokes in *Head of a Catalan Peasant IV* (1925) as “a passage into something—yet not as a breach, not precisely as ‘penetration.’ . . . The beholder’s access to the luminous depths of the canvas . . . evokes neither an empty space nor a resistant surface. The substance or surface . . . is like the surface of water, in that to touch it at all is not just to penetrate it, but also be in it. . . . The field never loses its effect of being continuous and open. It appears to incorporate violations of its continuity into itself” (113). Such characteristic backgrounds also allow the viewer to infer, from the evident process by which they were made, a feeling of temporality. They thus exhibit a “convergence between the time of beholding and the time of the events pictured” (137). That effect of an “eternal present tense” really turns out to be the product of an asymptotic approach to a certain limit: namely, the limit that prevents representation from ever being able to “catch up” to the activity of representation.

The final chapter (“Suicide: Leiris and Sirel”) examines the particularly strong affinity between Miró and Leiris. Both shared with Einstein a conception of a mode of representation that permitted an identification of artist with his motif yet also occasioned his withdrawal or separation from it. (Indeed, Einstein’s notion of “fixed ecstasy,” from which Palermo derives the title of his book, is meant to name this double relation of identity and detachment.) Miró and Leiris desire to permit “one’s sense of self to occupy the customary place of the not-self” (146), so as to achieve a paradoxical relationship of encountering oneself in the act of painting or writing. Palermo keenly tracks the theme in Leiris’s 1923–1924 journals and in a chapter from his autobiographical novel, *Aurora* (1928 or 1929, published in 1946), in which the protagonist, Damoclès Sirel (“Leiris” spelled backwards), wants “to make writing coincide with the experience it narrates”—even at the extreme limit, which is to say at the very moment of the author’s death (151). But what would be significant about meeting or exceeding that “nonnarratable limit,” or attempting to? Here, Palermo’s philosophical temperament, in evidence throughout his book, emerges even more strongly. The problem of Leiris’s autobiographical experiment turns out to be a problem of knowing other minds, that is, of skepticism. Riven by an insurmountable temporal disjunction between the narrated *I* and the narrating *I*, Sirel’s autobiography cannot provide even its own author with certain knowledge. “Suicide” is a metaphor for the attempt on the part of Miró and Leiris to represent the impossible convergence of subject and object in the activity of writing or painting (171).

At the beginning of *Fixed Ecstasy*, Palermo claims that Miró wanted to “evoke for the beholder a sense of one’s own continuity with, as well as separation from, the fictional world of the painting” (2). In his conclusion, he resolutely clarifies the implications of that claim. Miró’s staging of automatism turns out to be analogous to our own continuity with, as well as separation from, others and ourselves. As discontinuous beings, we may long to erase our sense of separateness, and Miró’s and Leiris’s efforts have been to represent a threshold “between a preobjective world of continuousness and an objective world of separateness” (181). It is automatism—Miró’s extension of his action into the fictional world of his paintings, yet his displacing of it onto other objects or phenomena—that facilitates his taking that double stance and that “fixes for us the silence on that verge, where the challenge of communication most nearly approaches a perfect communion between the one who speaks or writes and the one who reads or listens” (180). But what automatism can never bridge, as more than an effect, is the gap. So we are left with the dual challenge—generated by our finitude and separateness—of expressing ourselves, and of trying to understand the expressions of others.

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