

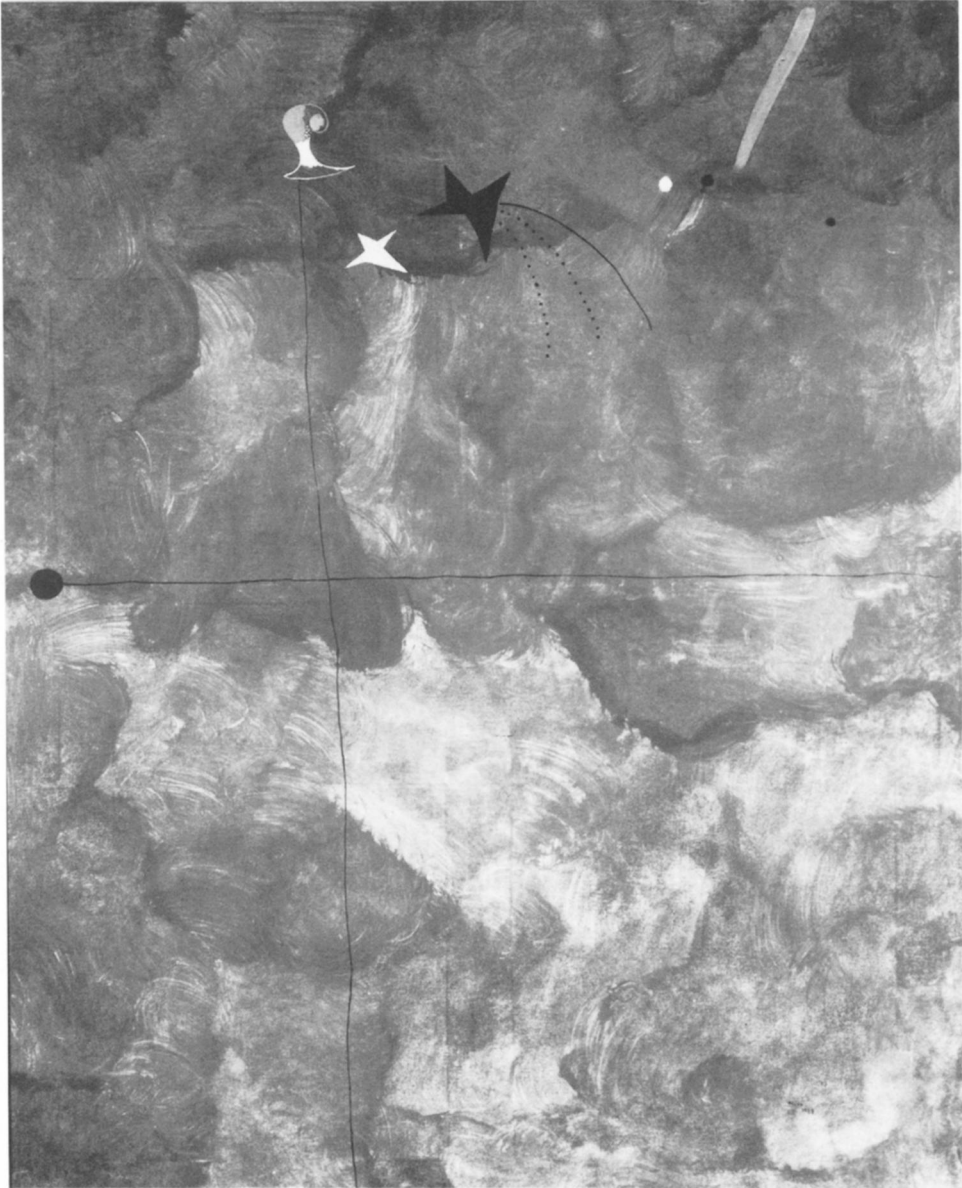
Tactile Translucence: Miró, Leiris, Einstein*

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One might be tempted to see the background of Joan Miró's *Head of a Catalan Peasant IV* for what it is (albeit in a certain limited sense): the remains of Miró's physical encounter with the canvas. This scumbled blue ground—which I will call the background even though it often refuses or complicates the organization of a deep space—records in some detail the application of a thin layer of paint. Variations in the density of the paint even across the trajectory of a single stroke appear in *Head of a Catalan Peasant* with exemplary clarity, so that the juxtaposition of such brush strokes makes visible the act of painting—that is, it is a kind of exploration of the surface, in which the variation of direction and pressure play important roles in revealing the support to the beholder. Nowhere is this effect clearer than in the traces of stretcher bars that appear intermittently in Miró's paintings from around 1925, to which I'll return presently.

But the brush strokes also present a visible, and fundamentally pictorial, illusion of a kind of surface. They picture a different substance, one not exactly like paint spread on canvas. The variation of the blue paint's density calls to mind a substance or surface that is, like the scumbled paint that represents it, translucent. The background reveals a distance, a kind of luminous space behind the layer of blue, but does not exactly do so directly. The blue paint makes itself felt over the whole picture, even while disclosing what it covers. It assumes the character, one might say, of a fluid's surface, or of a surface that contains fluid. This effect results not so much from emphasis on the character of paint as a liquid, but more from fluctuations in density and form that call to mind a translucent liquid like murky water.

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Joan Miró. Head of a Catalan Peasant IV. 1925. Moderna Museet, Stockholm. © 2001 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGAP, Paris.

The “translucence” I am describing goes beyond the visual. In addition to implying the real means of its making, this background also calls up for the beholder tactile associations that suggest a remarkable fictive substance or surface—one with no single, obvious correlate in common experience. In this mode of tactile illusion, what the articulations of the background evoke most directly is not simply another surface or another substance in particular, but another kind of movement.

Reading back indexically, as it were, through the marks of Miró’s physical activity, one can see the brush strokes for what all brush strokes are. One can see them as indices of an encounter with what Merleau-Ponty calls a “surface tactile phenomen[on]”—with a “two-dimensional tactile object [that] more or less firmly resists penetration.”¹ On the other hand, the pictorial effect of the backgrounds invites the beholder into a depth inside the fictive surface, but not as though through a breach—that is to say, not precisely by means of “penetration.” Wherever the blue paint parts, it also encloses its parting without forming a new edge around the rupture. The field never loses its effect of being continuous and open; it appears to incorporate violations of its continuity into itself. The background comes closer to the kind of substance Merleau-Ponty says the exploring hand finds “between the bristles of the brush and the threads of the linen”—not “a tactile nothingness, but a tactile space devoid of matter, a tactile background” (*PP*, p. 316). One imagines, I think, a substance that one comes to know less by the roughness or smoothness of its surface than by the way it might feel to move through it. Miró’s field of blue is a little like the surface of water, in that to touch it at all is not just to penetrate it, but also to be in it. This is what one might call a tactile translucence.

My claim will be that, in Miró’s paintings of the early 1920s, pictorial space becomes a surface in which the activity of a surrogate offers a metaphor for the painter’s bodily entry into the surface of the painting.² As I shall explain, this allegory of painting can be understood as Miró’s radical response to the Cubist pictorial sensibility—a response that he articulated in cooperation with his closest comrades, such as Michel Leiris.

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1962), pp. 315–16; hereafter cited in the text and abbreviated as *PP*.

2. There seems to me to be a deep harmony between the works of Miró that I am discussing and those of Gustave Courbet, as discussed by Michael Fried in *Courbet’s Realism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Miró and Courbet seem to have shared several related tendencies—to transform the convention that the beholder and painting face one another by making paintings that picture spaces congruent with, rather than turned to oppose, the painter or beholder; to represent metaphorically the activity of painting itself as some other process; and to represent allegorically the painter’s hands in the picture (and especially, as turned into the picture and as engaged in an activity metaphorically linked to painting). Miró acknowledged his enthusiasm for Courbet’s paintings in at least two ways: by his membership in the *Agrupação Courbet* and in remarks to Pierre Schneider during a tour of the Louvre that Schneider transcribed in his *Louvre Dialogues*, trans. Patricia Southgate (New York: Atheneum, 1971). Fried cites one of Miró’s remarks in *Courbet’s Realism* during his discus-

As I've already mentioned, many of Miró's paintings from around 1925, including *Head of a Catalan Peasant IV*, show traces of the stretcher or strainer bars. Part of what is striking about the traces of the stretchers is their disjunction from the gestures that pass over and even articulate them. The lack of gestural quality in the traced shapes makes them a new kind of motif, a new kind of "line" that seems to be prior to, or at least separate from, the exploration that reveals them. They appear to rise through the backgrounds like the silhouette of a window frame emerging through draperies or like an object submerged just far enough beneath the background's murky surface to be visible only in places.

The tensions between the drawn motifs and the backgrounds and between the scumbling in the backgrounds and the traces of the stretcher bar suggest something one might call thickness—an effect of superposition that is distinct from the various, ambiguous, and even conflicting kinds of depth that each of the different modes (drawing, scumbling, tracing) can create when considered independently.³ Miró frequently placed in his paintings certain objects or incidents that seem intended to call attention to that "thickness": rainbows, for example, and spiderwebs. Rainbows and spiderwebs are ideal for making thickness visible if only because, while they offer some qualities of surfaces, they do not obscure what is behind them. Anne Umland has suggested that Miró's interest in those ambiguous surfaces might become clearer in light of his attention to several lines from Rimbaud's *Illuminations* that appeared in the journal *L'Esprit nouveau* in 1921. Miró read *L'Esprit nouveau* and was impressed enough by the lines to transcribe them

sion of Courbet's seascapes: "'One feels physically drawn to [*The Stormy Sea*], as by an undertow,' the Spanish painter Joan Miró remarked on a visit to the Louvre. 'It is fatal. Even if this painting had been behind our backs, we would have felt it'" (p. 215).

In conversations during the preparation of my dissertation, Fried remarked on the strength—which I find both striking and surprising—of the affinity between the two painters.

As Charles Haxtausen pointed out to me, one might see in my interpretation of Miró's works an affinity with certain paintings of Henri Matisse. For accounts of Matisse's work that seem to me helpful for elaborating such a similarity, see Yve-Alain Bois, "On Matisse: The Blinding," *October* 68 (Spring 1994), pp. 61–121; Kate Linker, "Reflections on a Goldfish Bowl: Autonomy and Analogy in Matisse," *Artforum* 19, no. 3 (October 1980), pp. 65–73; and Theodore Reff, "Matisse: Meditations on a Statuette and Goldfish," *Arts Magazine* 51, no. 3 (November 1976), pp. 109–75.

3. Carolyn Lanchner elaborates nicely on the kind of effect I'm thinking of: "Because of its layering, collage must tend to manifest itself as flat plane, whereas the nature of paint, its color and substance, is to suggest volume. This is especially true of the lightly brushed and poured glazes of pigment that lie on the surfaces of Miró's paintings of 1925; and there can be no doubt that Miró wanted to produce sensations of shifting depth and atmospheric oscillation. Nonetheless, he was a painter of his time, and was not trying to create a Symbolist, Whistlerian fog. In countering such an effect, the stretcher imprint had a double utility: as a diagram of surface, it visually binds the luminous veils of paint to a condition of planarity; as a line, the imprint acts most peculiarly—heretical to its normal function, it deprives ground of recessive retreat by moving it in front of the mark (Carolyn Lanchner, "Peinture-Poésie, Its Logic and Logistics," in her *Joan Miró* [exh. cat., New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993], p. 43; hereafter cited in the text and abbreviated as *JM*). I agree fundamentally with Lanchner's view about the effect of the stretcher bars' silhouettes, although I'd like to reserve some distance from her alignment of collage with planarity and "nature of paint" with volume.

later into his notebook. They read, “As soon as the idea of the Flood had subsided, a hare stopped in the clover and the swinging flower bells, and said its prayer through the spider’s web to the rainbow.”⁴ I believe that, when inserting rainbows and spiderwebs into his compositions, Miró had in mind a complex analogy between a pictorial space defined by those phenomena and the canvas. (In French, a spiderweb is a *toile d’araignée*—literally, a “spiders canvas.”) This analogy creates in pictures like *Pastorale* (1923–24)⁵ a space more similar to the non- or quasi-surfaces of rainbows and webs than to either the surface of the canvas or deep pictorial space. Another way of describing this kind of pictorial depth would be to say that the quasi-surfaces of the rainbow and the spiderweb neither stop depth the way an opaque surface does nor produce deep space; rather, they mark the difference between here and there. They do so by creating a visible but not opaque separation—a scrim—between the two categories of space. This scrim divides the here from the there by a kind of notional thickness. As such, these surfaces offer a depth that is at once absolute discontinuity and permeable boundary, ambiguously infinitesimal and infinite, and which, as a way of describing the distance between the speaker and addressee of a prayer, might seem therefore perfectly apt. Thus the rainbow or the spiderweb can define a space in the fictional world of the painting that is pointedly analogous in certain respects to the minimal depth it literally occupies on or in the skin of the painting.

The rainbow of *Pastorale* is like similar features of other works, such as the refracted arcs of Miró’s earlier *Spanish Playing Cards*, in that *Pastorale*’s rainbow represents, by means of its intangible colored surface, a thickness that serves as both surface and space. The thickness it represents is that in which it is generated and

4. Rimbaud, “Après le déluge” in *Les Illuminations*, cited in Anne Umland, “Joan Miró and Collage in the 1920s: The Dialectic of Painting and Anti-Painting,” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, May 1997), p. 152. “Après le déluge” appears in parallel translation in *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*, trans., intro., and notes by Wallace Fowlie (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 212, 213: “Aussitôt que l’idée du Déluge se fût rassise, / Un lièvre s’arrêta dans les sainfoins et les clochettes mouvantes, et dit sa prière à l’arc-en-ciel à travers la toile de l’araignée.” The lines appeared in Jean Epstein’s “Le Phénomène Littéraire, VII,” *L’Esprit nouveau* 13 (December 1921), p. 1435. Umland also notes that Miró repeated the lines in a conversation published by Jean-Clarence Lambert, “Poétique de Miró,” *Opus International* 58 (February 1976), p. 19 (Umland, “Joan Miró and Collage in the 1920s,” p. 152, n. 266). Umland interprets Miró’s spiderwebs in the light of his interest in Rimbaud’s verses. Part of Umland’s point—that the gridlike spiderweb joins the rainbow in building upon the imagery of Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*—seems compelling to me. Her claim that the stickiness of the spiderweb evokes Miró’s intermittent interest in collage during the period seems at least plausible. The idea of a spiderweb as a model for the papier collé might easily have occurred to him. As Umland points out: “A Braque papier collé reproduced in the plate section of *L’Esprit nouveau* (Paris) 1, no. 6 (March 1921) literally illustrates this point. Various collaged elements are set within what appears to be a drawn, spiderweb-shaped grid” (Umland, “Miro and Collage in the 1920s,” p. 153, n. 268).

5. There is also a rainbow in one drawing associated with the painting (numbered 4352 by the Fundació Joan Miró, hereafter abbreviated F.J.M. See *Obra de Joan Miró: Dibuixos, pintura, escultura, ceràmica, tèxtils*, dir. Rosa Maria Matlet; trans. Ramón Ibero, Robert Marrast, Kenneth Lyons [Barcelona: Fundació Joan Miró, 1988]), but not in a finished drawing of the same title (from October 23, 1924; illustrated in *JM*, p. 125), or in the preparatory drawing related to the latter work (F.J.M. 621A).



Miró. Spanish Playing Cards. 1920. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.
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suspended—a thickness like that of transparent glass. *Pastorale's* prismatic bands in the form of rainbows continue a theme of projection-within-the-picture that occurs frequently in Miró's earlier work. *Pastorale's* rainbow also recalls the more nearly contemporaneous *Catalan Landscape* and its prismatic curves. In *Catalan Landscape (The Hunter)*, to paraphrase an argument I have made elsewhere, the rainbow that curves upward from the left side of the hunter's hat serves to extend the figure of the hunter, falling away from it like the skins of an onion, and thereby representing its continuity with its world and joining the figure to the space around it.⁶ The rainbow expands the hunter's body while, on the other

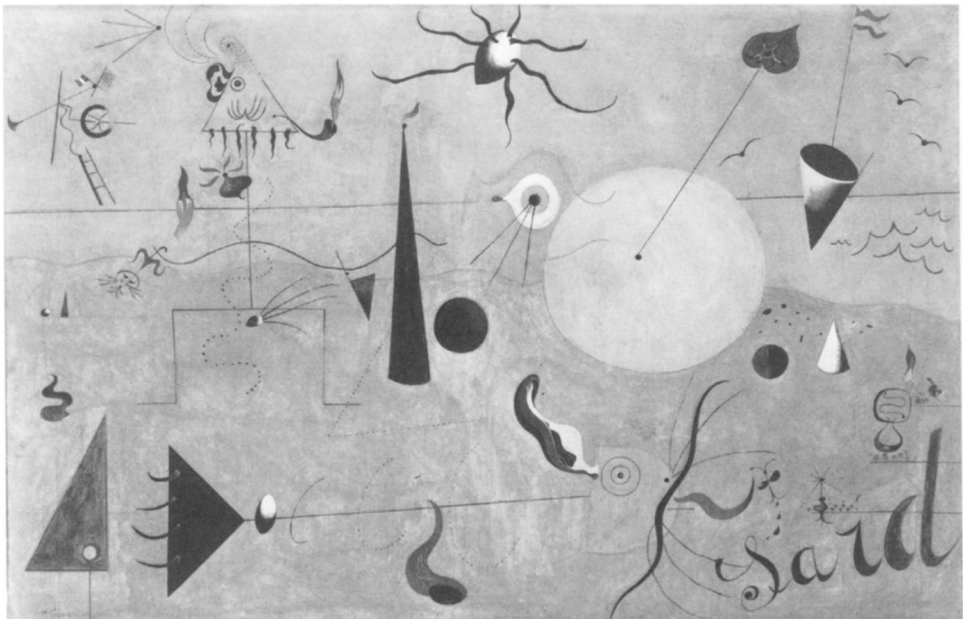
6. The set of three lines that comprise the rainbow could easily be taken for a plume on the hunter's hat. However, Miró identified it as a rainbow for William Rubin (see William Rubin, *Miró in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Including Remainder-Interest and Promised Gifts* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973], p. 22). The ambiguity seems to me to support my suggestion that the lines help compress the space and imply the hunter's expansion into the landscape's space.

hand, it collapses the space of the landscape, pressing the sky into the foreground like a backdrop. The joining of the rainbow to the figure of the hunter draws the sky up into a space that approaches the minimal, literal thickness of the canvas. Moreover, *Catalan Landscape* repeats the analogy I've already noted between the rainbow and the canvas by juxtaposing the lines of the prism with a visible scuff that roughly echoes the prism's arcs while it mimics the edge of the stretcher bar and registers Miró's own encounter with the thickness of his canvas. To put it differently, the rainbow marks the meeting of the hunter and his world the same way the scuff marks the meeting of Miró and the world of the painting.⁷

Miró created a represented thickness in his canvases by combining effects of translucence, transparency, and refraction, as well as by allusions to the pagelike space of the support. This pictured thickness thematizes the canvas's literal thickness and Miró's physical encounter with it, making the real canvas into the kind of surface that would permit Miró to be in the picture by touching it, to enter it in something like the way that touching water is also being in it. Next I will turn to

7. For discussions of the scuff, see *JM*, pp. 26 and 33–34, and the second chapter of my unpublished dissertation, "Fixed Ecstasy: The Early Artistic Maturity of Joan Miró and Michel Leiris" (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, January 2000).

Miró. Catalan Landscape (The Hunter). 1923-24. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2001 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.



remarks by two of Miró's colleagues—Michel Leiris and Carl Einstein—that corroborate my claims, and help me elaborate in greater detail the implications of the kind of space Miró constructed in his work for our historical understanding of Miró's achievement.

During Miró's first years in Paris, in the early 1920s, he worked in a studio beside André Masson's in the rue Blomet. By mid-1922, the two painters, along with the aspiring writer Michel Leiris, formed the core of a close-knit artistic fraternity that all three later credited with playing a determining role in their careers. They were not yet engaged in Surrealism, but the three were all linked to the world of the Cubists. They were all friendly with Max Jacob, a companion of the Cubists from the first decade of the century, and within a short time the group at the rue Blomet became attached to the circle around the Cubists' dealer, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. Kahnweiler became Masson's first dealer the next year and Leiris began courting Kahnweiler's stepdaughter in 1925. Both Masson and Leiris were regulars at the Kahnweilers' weekly gatherings. The relations between Kahnweiler's circle and the young artists at the rue Blomet have been little studied, but they help explain the extraordinary growth of the young talents in the crucial years immediately preceding their participation in the Surrealist movement.

Carl Einstein is one figure close to Kahnweiler whose commentary on the artists of the rue Blomet is particularly instructive. Einstein was among the first art critics to write insightfully about African sculpture—Kahnweiler praised Einstein's 1915 *Negerplastik* both as a work on African art and as an essay on sculpture in general.⁸ By 1921 (when our record of correspondence between Einstein and Kahnweiler begins) Einstein's writings on Cubism were based on a firsthand acquaintance with Kahnweiler and his artists.⁹ Einstein wrote no less perceptively about Masson and Miró, whom he described as a young generation of "romantics," who were formed by Cubism but who also reacted against the Cubist sensibility. By the end of the decade, Leiris and Einstein worked together with Georges Bataille on the short-lived journal *Documents*. The criticism Leiris and Einstein wrote during the 1920s offers a way of seeing Miró's work in relation to Cubism, and thus offers a context for understanding the important transforma-

8. See, for example, a letter from Kahnweiler to Einstein, dated December 10, 1921 (catalogued as no. 6 in *Carl Einstein and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Correspondance 1921–1939*, translated, introduced, and annotated by Liliane Meffre (Marseille: André Dimanche, 1993), p. 28 (in French) and 125 (in the original German).

9. For a recent discussion of the speculation about Einstein's early involvement with the Cubists and their circle, see Werner E. Drewes, "Max Raphael und Carl Einstein: Konstellationen des Aufbruchs in die «Klassische Moderns» im Zeichen der Zeit," *Études Germaniques* 53, no. 1 (Janvier-Mars 1998), pp. 123–58. See especially p. 126, n. 7. My thanks to Charles Haxthausen for bringing Drewes's essay to my attention.

tions in Miró's work that amount, in my opinion, to his attainment of artistic maturity.

In a 1929 article in *Documents*, Leiris points to the role of tactility in Miró's art.¹⁰ Leiris imagines a game in which a deck is divided into "cards of five different colors," each color standing in for one of the five senses. Leiris does not explain this game, nor does he say in exactly what respect the art of painting is like a card game. But Leiris clearly aligns a traditional notion of painting with the visual sphere of the colored cards and attributes Miró's success, on the other hand, to his ability to alter the terms of the game. According to Leiris, Miró owes his extraordinary success in this game of perception to his simplicity—which Leiris compares to that of primitive peoples who depend on "aide-mémoire" devices and sign systems built of notches and knots. The devices Leiris compares to Miró's tactics are all, unlike colors, legible by touch. (In fact, while Leiris was preparing the essay, he asked Miró for a few autobiographical notes. In his brief response, Miró featured an anecdote about his early artistic training, in which he was taught to improve his draughtsmanship by drawing objects he had only touched and had never seen.¹¹) The game Leiris describes is ruled by a thinly disguised bias—that is, since color is only available to vision, the game of the senses is one ordinarily played using only one sense, that of sight. But Miró makes the game in which vision stands in for all the senses one in which notches and knots allow touch to make inroads against vision's primacy.

Along with the devices of the non-Europeans, Leiris includes a typical Western trick: "the famous knot in the handkerchief that I will perhaps take one day . . . as a slip knot, but never . . . as a means to avoid forgetting, as ought to happen more, the existence of logic and the outside world." I would characterize the connections upon which Leiris's remarks depend—between vision and an outer world, on the one hand, and between touch and an inner world, on the other hand—in terms of objective and bodily space. (In doing so, I am again following Merleau-Ponty, although this time, more loosely.) Vision permits "objectification" more easily than touch. That is to say, the objects of vision can readily seem wholly distinct from the perceiving subject, while touch tends to emphasize the continuity between subject and object. When I look at a table, I see it as located there; when I touch it, though, it seems to me to be here, meaning that it is where I am, even to the point of making it difficult for me to feel its distinctness from me, because I encounter it only in the space of my own body. The impression of objectification is associated with an experience of objective space, while awareness of

10. Michel Leiris, "Joan Miró," in *Brisées: Broken Branches*, trans. Lydia Davis (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989), pp. 25–29; first published in *Documents* 1, no. 5 (1929).

11. Joan Miró, "Letter to Michel Leiris. Montroig, September 25, 1929" in *Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Margit Rowell, trans. Paul Auster and Patricia Mathews (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1986), p. 110.

the continuity between subject and object tends to locate experience on the frontier of a bodily space. I can look at my hand, and think of it as being out there, but I tend to experience a pressure against my hand as pressing in here, where I am, on the horizon of my body's own space. When Leiris closes his account of Miró's emphatically tactile triumph over vision in painting with an expression of his desire to forget the "outside world," he seems to be praising Miró's painting for enjoying—or permitting—privileged access to something like "bodily space."

And, indeed, I see Miró's exploration of the surface of the canvas, as it is documented in his backgrounds, as calling forth a surface that it's important to think of as being continuous with his "bodily space." In other words, in such backgrounds, Miró may be said to have painted something like the horizon of "bodily space," itself.

In the same essay, Leiris explains further how we might understand Miró's relationship to represented space. Leiris describes an exercise allegedly performed by Tibetan monks that confers what he calls the "*understanding of emptiness*."¹² The exercise is this: "You look at a garden," Leiris explains, "and you examine it in every detail . . . until your memory of it is so exact and intense that you can continue seeing it, with equal clarity, even with your eyes closed." "The idea," Leiris continues, "is to subtract, one by one, all the elements that make up the garden, without the image losing anything of its force or ceasing to fascinate you, however weakly." Leiris has the practitioner continue, until the scene is completely void of objects, "allowing the spirit," as he puts it, "really to see and contemplate emptiness." He concludes by praising his friend: "The Catalan Joan Miró must in all fairness be included among the contemporary painters who have gone furthest in this sort of endeavor."

Leiris is careful not to equate "emptiness" with "nothingness," though he does not explain the difference between the two states. He says the emptiness envisioned by the practitioner is a "physical" one, and opens onto "moral and metaphysical emptiness," but Leiris clearly implies that something must remain to the meditator, something that constitutes the difference between emptiness and nothingness. As in the case of the card game, Leiris's remarks are somewhat elliptical, but whatever else might remain, the mind conducting the experiment must continue to engage in the imaginary spectacle, even as the garden loses its objects and, ultimately, disappears itself.

What Leiris's thought experiment implies is his belief in a space, if only a notional one, that is co-present with the space of the outside world. The not-exactly-nothingness of such a space depends on no presence except that of the

12. According to Leiris's later recollection, the Tibetan ascetics and the exercise he describes in his *Documents* essay on Miró were introduced to him by a visiting traveler named Mrs. Alexandra David-Neel in 1929. (See Michel Leiris, *Fibrilles, La Règle du jeu*, vol. 3 [Paris: NRF/Gallimard, 1966], pp. 14–15.)

subject who experiences it. It exists without objects and without sky or earth, without “objective space,” but what remains is the here outward from which the subject directs his or her attention. The space revealed by this lesson seems to me to be none other than what I’ve been calling bodily space. And Miró’s mastery of this lesson is, in his friend’s estimation, a condition of his success as a painter. Further, it seems to corroborate my own reading of the tactile translucence—the thematization of a permeable thickness—in the pictorial spaces of Miró’s early mature works.

By turning inward to the monks’ garden, Miró produces an object for vision in the “outer world”—a picture of the horizon of his bodily space in the background of his canvas. And against that horizon, Miró places a figure—such as that of his Catalan peasant—that then takes possession of the same space. As Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, the space of the painting serves the figure of the peasant as both space and body.¹³ And in this sense, as I shall explain, the figure is Miró’s double.¹⁴ This understanding of the painter’s relationship to pictorial space is fundamentally opposed to that of Cubism—at least as colleagues such as Leiris would have understood it from associates in Kahnweiler’s circle. And it is against this view of Cubism that I propose to see the historical relevance of Miró’s construction of pictorial space.

Einstein puts forth a particularly full and sophisticated version of that insider’s account of Cubism. He renders analytic Cubism as an emphatically visual movement in painting—that is to say, one that insists on a beholder and a painter who primarily construct their worlds from visual phenomena. “The motif,” he explains, “is a function of man’s vision; it is subjected to the conditions of the picture. The decisive factor is volume, which is not identical to mass, because volume is a totalization of discontinuous optical movements. Thus the conventional continuum of the body is broken”¹⁵ Cubism, on Einstein’s account, presents visual experiences that represent volume as the product of discontinuous optical movements. By discontinuous optical movements, he refers to shifting perspectives that are offered together. The vision he describes requires that the perceiving subject simultaneously assume, or imagine assuming, multiple positions relative to the motif that he or she constructs in his or her encounter with the picture. This vision implies a disembodied beholder: to be in more than one place at a given time is tantamount to being located nowhere—it is to be granted access to the

13. Rosalind Krauss, “Magnetic Fields: The Structure” in *Joan Miró: Magnetic Fields* (exh. cat., New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1972), pp. 18–19.

14. Lanchner writes of the hunter in *Catalan Landscape*, as well as of the figures in the *Head of a Catalan Peasant* series, that “Miró’s identification with the persona of his Catalan peasant” is “open to empathetic intuition” and further supported by the cruciform broken *J* in a 1973 example of Miró’s signature (*JM*, p. 37). She also implies that Miró identified, albeit jokingly, with the figure of Columbus beneath that of the hunter in *Catalan Landscape* (*JM*, pp. 26–27).

15. Carl Einstein, “Notes sur le Cubisme,” *Documents* (June, 1929), p. 153 (my translation).

world without having a place in it. Einstein's Cubism grants the beholder such access and, as a consequence, limits the beholder in a certain sense to this disembodied access. This relation to the represented world could hardly be more different from the one Leiris attributes to Miró—in whose works a markedly tactile resonance takes the beholder's body as the underlying space onto which a represented world can be projected. And yet, as I shall show, Einstein shares important aspects of Leiris's view of Miró's painting.

The text I have in mind as a starting place for explaining Einstein's view of Miró—and of Masson, as well—is a fascinating chapter from his short book on African sculpture, *Negerplastik*. The chapter, entitled “Masks and Related Practices,” explains a kind of “ecstasy,” which is a central concept in Einstein's account of the younger artists. A mask, according to Einstein, represents to the African the power to suspend not just his ordinary appearance, but his sense of self. Putting the mask on induces ecstasy insofar as it causes the wearer to assume the identity of the god. This exchange of identity is “ecstasy.” Once removed from the wearer, the mask might well continue to represent the god, but as a distinct thing, separate from the worshiper. In view of these properties, the mask comes to represent for Einstein the very possibility of freezing—and thus of detaching—the act of identification. Hence the all-but-oxymoronic term he uses to sum up the mask's work: “fixed ecstasy.”¹⁶

According to Einstein, the mask is closely related to ritual uses of tattoos. The tattoo differs from the mask, however, in that the tattoo literally changes the worshiper's body and is not physically separable from that body. But in spite of that crucial difference, their relation clearly stems from their shared function: they both reify an exchange of identity between the self and the not-self—that is, they fix ecstasy.

The tattoo, on Einstein's account, lets the wearer participate in the power of a threatening natural phenomenon by representing that phenomenon on himself. Such a participation further serves the bearer's own desires by aligning them with the overwhelming external forces. And so a strange (one might say dialectical) relationship obtains between the tattooed body and the forces represented on it. Those forces of nature gain expression through an intensification of the tattooed body's own forms; meanwhile, the tattooed body asserts its drives against nature's resistance by incorporating and appropriating the external forces represented on it (*Negerplastik*, pp. 27–29). (If I understand Einstein correctly, then, the bearer of a tattoo that symbolizes lightning, for example, would expect to gain safety from the hostile phenomenon by identifying himself with it, and also to win for his own

16. Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik*, ed. Rolf-Peter Baacke; afterword, Hannes Böhringer (Berlin: Fannei & Walz, 1992), p. 29; hereafter cited in the text as *Negerplastik* (translation by Anna Brailovsky and me): “I would like to call the mask fixed ecstasy, perhaps also the ever-available means to stimulate one powerfully to ecstasy, in which the face of the venerated power or of the animal is given in a fixed form.”

desires a share in the superhuman energy of the lightning bolt.) Therefore, although the wearer cannot remove and reattach the tattoo, as the mask's wearer can remove and reattach the mask, the tattoo's bearer comes to stand in a double relation to his or her body—he or she asserts it, but in so doing changes or even loses it.¹⁷ The tattoo's wearer, even though he or she turns to tattooing in the name of his or her own drives, establishes a kind of distance from him- or herself. The tattoo makes the wearer's whole body into the equivalent of a mask, which is in some sense removed from the wearer (although not in quite the same, literal way a mask is).

When Einstein speaks of ecstasy in an essay on Masson, it is once again in order to associate ecstasy with a fixed form in external objects—to invest totems with the power to take the beholder's place. Einstein calls Masson a master of “ecstasy” and explains:

Metamorphosis is the classic drama of totemism and probably one of the oldest dramatic motifs. . . . It is by virtue of man's identification with the animal that it became possible to project the sacrifice of the self. And it is in that identification that we find the origin of such figures as religious mediators and substitutes. It is thus that I would like to interpret the fish-people, the dying birds, and the animals of foliage in Masson's paintings. These animals are identifications onto which one projects the throes of death, so as not to be killed oneself.

Einstein continues his assessment of Masson's work:

The limits of objects have disappeared. Man no longer observes. He lives in the orbit of objects turned psychological functions. Optical simultaneity is replaced by analogies. One might speak of mystical anatomy.¹⁸

The separation of the beholder from the world of the motif that Einstein described under the sign of “optical simultaneity,” and which characterized his account of Cubism in general, gives way in his account of Masson's enterprise to this “ecstasy” that produces “analogies.” Such analogies, in turn, make over the function of beholding as a kind of identification or participation.

This point continues a larger thesis in Einstein's history of art. The traditional representation of the static object served to calm man's fear of death.¹⁹ The

17. “To tattoo oneself is to make one's body the means and end of a representation. The Negro sacrifices his body and intensifies it; his body is given over visibly to the communal, which acquires tangible form on it” (*Negerplastik*, p. 27).

18. Carl Einstein, “André Masson, Étude ethnologique,” in *Documents* 1, no. 2 (1929), p. 102 (my translation).

19. Carl Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts, Universal Bibliothek, Kunstwissenschaften* (Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam jun., 1988), p. 75; hereafter cited in the text and abbreviated as *Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*.

Cubists defied this old superstitious use of objects, depriving the beholder of reassurance against death and instead building representations according to a combination of disparate, simultaneous views that eliminated the stable object (and as I've already noted, destroyed the "conventional continuum of the body").²⁰

Einstein describes "analogies" as typical of the young generation of "romantics," which is the term he uses to describe Masson and Miró. The younger artists, Einstein explains, have returned to the motif. But instead of regarding it as the older traditions did—as an object separate from the beholder and reassuring in its stability—they find themselves subject to the motif, as to a compulsive thought, so that when they look at it they no longer "observe," but "participate." The reaction takes the form of "impulses," or "hallucinatory processes," projected onto things or animals with which the artist identifies. Like the ecstasy of the tattooed African, an enterprise like Miró's, on Einstein's account, permits the artist to give himself over bodily to the representation. My claim that Einstein correctly characterized the sensibility of the young artists at the rue Blomet, and that Leiris should be grouped with the two painters Einstein names, is supported by an essay Leiris contributed to *Documents* in 1930 entitled "Man and His Insides." The piece begins with an anecdote culled from a mid-nineteenth-century collection of morbid stories. The story Leiris cites is entitled "An Excess of Cleanliness":

Seeing an open side of beef being gutted in a butcher's stall, a woman experienced such profound disgust that she nearly fainted. When questioned about the attack she was suffering, she asked:

"Do we have so many nasty things inside our bodies too?"

The answer she was given convinced her to let herself starve to death.²¹

Leiris's story offers a case of just the kind of identification that Einstein ascribes to the rue Blomet painters. It is precisely his or her embodiedness, or "insides," that Einstein's Cubism allows the beholder to forget. But, true to his affinity with the younger "romantics," Leiris responds to a different kind of representation: one that permits a sort of ecstatic identification. He finds in this kind of representation a power to bridge the gulf that separates the subject from the object.

20. Under Cubism, Einstein explains: "wurde die Fläche als technische Einheit der gleichzeitigen, doch kontrastierenden Ansichten benutzt. Hingegen entfernt sich die formale Konstruktion gänzlich vom Gegenstand als organischem oder nutzbarem Objekt, die gegenständlichen Übereinkünfte werden zugunsten stärkerer menschlicher Freiheit durchbrochen. Man baut nun Gestalten, die den unmittelbaren seelischen Vorgängen entsprechen und durch diese ist ihre Struktur bestimmt. Die Beständigkeit der Objekte, ein Rest von Unsterblichkeitsglaube und Todesangst, ist zerbrochen. . . ."

Jedes abändernde Raumerfinden beunruhigt und gefährdet die Orientierung und mühselig erworbene Sicherheit. Die Voraussicht auf den gleichen Morgen ist nun bedroht und das Gefühl sorgloser Stetigkeit verringert" (*Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 81–82).

21. Michel Leiris, "Man and His Insides," in *Brisées: Broken Branches*, p. 41; hereafter cited in the text and abbreviated as *MHI*. First published in *Documents* 2, no. 5 (1930).



Miró. The Policeman. 1925. The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of Claire Zeisler. 1991.1499. Photograph courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago. © 2001 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Leiris takes the story of the disgusted woman as his starting point for considering man's relationship to the human body and to the external world. He turns his attention next to a set of prints—anatomical studies from the seventeenth century—that he sees as exemplary of a kind of humanizing beauty that acknowledges the “nasty things” within our bodies as crucial to establishing what he calls “*palpable links*” between ourselves and other human beings. He writes:

If we had to stand alone, confined to the use of only our own bodies in the face of external nature, this position would perhaps be grand—that of a god or a hero—but more dreadful than any other, for we would never understand what was that other thing, so distinct from our being, so indifferent to us, strange with a strangeness so very distant and glacial. What gives us the possibility of connecting ourselves with it is the existence of human creatures other than ourselves, who then act as mediators, because on the one hand they participate in nature (since, like it, they are exterior to us), while on the other hand they participate in us (since their constitution is more or less similar to our own constitution) (*MHI*, p. 42).

Of course, Leiris's “mediation” is a part played not only by human beings. As his opening example shows, a cow can mediate for us, if we are adequately sensitive to the experience of seeing it being dressed, and representations can do so as well. (His article turns in its course to anatomical drawings, soap advertisements, and the films of Adolphe Menjou.) In fact, it is merely a certain relationship we sometimes enter into with other things that permits “mediation” by allowing them to remind us that we are human. That relationship can obtain whenever we acknowledge, as the woman is caused to do before the butcher's stall, that we are embodied.

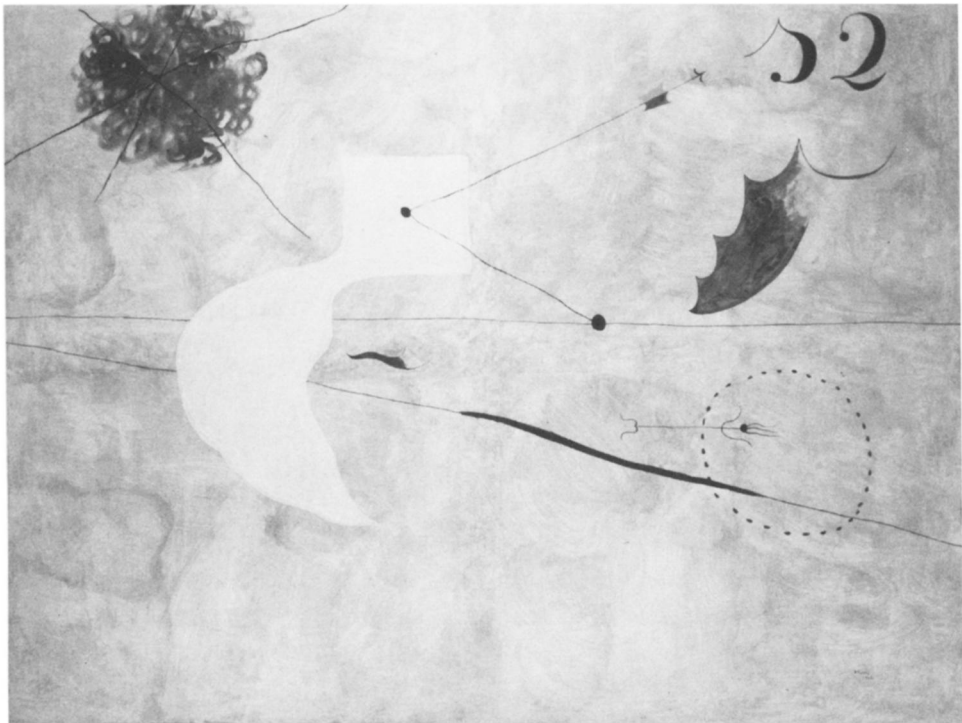
I suggest that Miró has constructed a “mediator” in *Head of a Catalan Peasant* that performs the function Leiris describes. The crossed lines that represent the peasant supply the beholder, and Miró, with a surrogate that serves at once as a point of identification and as “other.” It is, like the side of beef in “An Excess of Cleanliness,” both a figure in objective space and the beholder's body double that “mediates” between the beholder and the external world.²²

22. In discussing *Catalan Landscape*, Lanchner acknowledges, in passing, the possibility that Miró's work presented the painter and beholder with a “body” like his own (*JM*, p. 25). Lanchner's notion of corporeality is indebted, as she notes, to Richard Wollheim's chapter, “Painting, Metaphor, and the Body: Titian, Bellini, de Kooning, etc.” (in *Painting as an Art*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, vol. 33, Bollingen Series 35 [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987], pp. 305–56). Lanchner follows Wollheim in seeing the corporeality of the painting as an effect of certain formal characteristics. In the present discussion, I have tried to reassess the corporeality of Miró's canvases in terms of the discourse of painting contemporary with their execution. Because Wollheim bases his discussion of corporeality on more or less exclusively formalistic analyses—that is to say, because he disregards the historical milieu in which the works under consideration were produced—his observations about the corporeality of painting do not yield very specific conclusions about the significance of that corporeality for any single painter at any given time. My

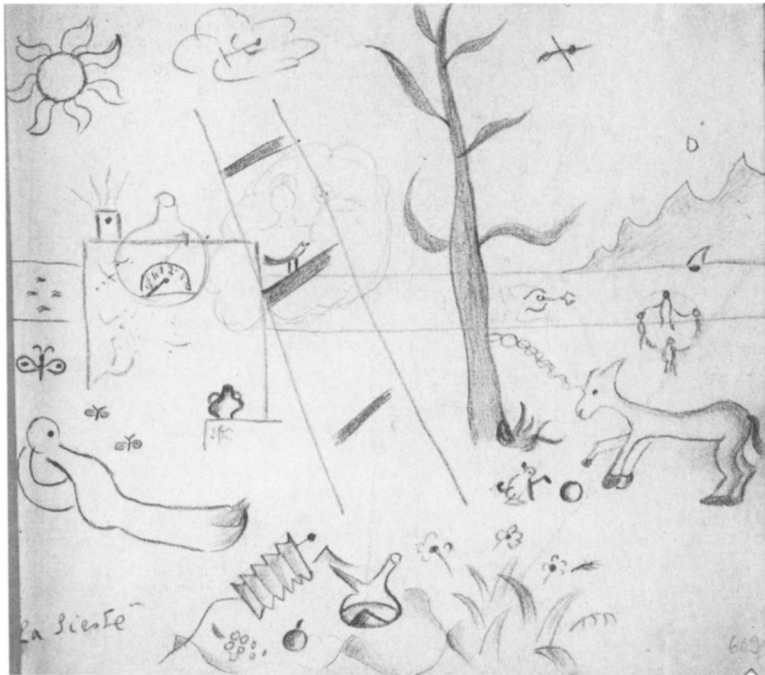
A detail in the painting suggestively supports this claim. If the figure formed by the crossed lines of *Head of a Catalan Peasant* represents a standing human form with its arms outstretched, then the large dot that punctuates the left end of that line would represent the figure's right hand. That dot, moreover, precisely coincides with the stretcher bar's edge, so that it is tempting to imagine the figure as feeling the edge that Miró himself often traced when he painted such backgrounds. It is as if the hand of the peasant is singled out as the double of the hand with which Miró painted.²³

argument seeks not only to establish that many of Miró's canvases of the mid-1920s can be seen as emphasizing their own corporeality—and consequently the painter's and beholder's—but also seeks to explain the importance of that emphasis to our understanding the discourses in which Miró and his closest associates took part.

23. In a very early sketch for the painting, Miró put the dot on the other side. A later drawing for the painting shows the "corrected" position of the dot. Quite a few of Miró's works from the year 1925, as well as from the years directly preceding and following 1925, show figures extending their right hands. I cannot discuss each one here, but a list of them would include, among others, *Figure* (See cat. no. 106 in Jacques Dupin's combined monograph and catalogue raisonnée, *Joán Miró: Life and Work*, trans. Norbert Guterman [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1962]), and a number of pictures entitled *Painting* (Dupin nos. 115, 127, 130, 131, 136, 151, and 163).



Miró. *The Siesta*. July–September 1925. Photo: Jean-François Toma. Musée national d'Art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. CNAC/MNAM/Dist Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.



Miró. *Preparatory drawing for The Siesta.*
 Fondació Joan Miró,
 Barcelona.
 © 2001 Artists Rights
 Society (ARS), New
 York/ADAGP, Paris.

In *The Policeman*, the human figure shows an even more emphatically exaggerated hand. Again, the hand emphasized is the figure's right hand. In this case, however, another figure is present—that of a horse partially painted in at the canvas's right edge. As in a number of pictures, Miró has left a figure incompletely filled, and in doing so has, so to speak, compressed the volume of the horse into the layer of paint that forms the painting's thickness. In this, the horse's body resembles the prisms in *Spanish Playing Cards*, *Pastorale*, and *Catalan Landscape*. Furthermore, the horse presents itself both as an object in fictive space and as a task, as a contour on the canvas to be filled in. And the figure of the policeman, with his prominent right hand, stands poised to complete the horse—by which I mean to say that the presence of a manual task (like coloring in) at the right-hand edge of the canvas pairs up with the large red hand extended toward the left-hand edge of the canvas by the figure of the policeman, who seems to lean toward the horse as if preparing to touch it.

It is important, I think, that the horse is incomplete not only in the sense that it has not been fully painted in, but also in that its form apparently extends beyond the limits of the canvas. Another way of putting this is to say that the outer edge of the horse is the same as the outer edge of the canvas—so we can say that the tasks facing the policeman and Miró (caressing the thicknesses of the horse and the painting, respectively) coincide in the same way.

A similar identification of represented volume with the thickness of paint on the canvas appears in *The Siesta*, in the incomplete way in which the mountains have been colored in. There the silhouette of the mountain range is partly filled in, as in the case of the policeman's horse. Moreover, the mountains echo the form of

the “12” that sits in the sky as if the sky were the face of a sundial and the motif’s mountains were just a facade—and as if both coincided with the canvas’s surface.

Consider, too, the figure of the swimmer. Her stroke is noteworthy. For one thing, its shape is incorrect. From the point of view of a stationary observer, a swimmer’s stroke does not describe a circular trajectory. If it did, the swimmer wouldn’t move through the water. There is a simple explanation for Miró’s “mistake,” though. In the 1970s, Miró described a preparatory drawing for *The Siesta*: “Yes, it’s a complete scene with all the accessories. There’s the sea, a sail, a woman swimming, the peaks of a mountain. . . . The first horizontal (marking the edge of the beach) is bisected by a ring of dancers.”²⁴ The swimmer’s stroke evidently took its shape from a circular dance called a *sardana*. Miró’s account points to another problem, though. Reviewing the drawing even fifty years later, Miró remarks that the dancer’s ring bisects the shoreline. That poses no problem in a picture of dancers by the water. But when Miró transferred the ring to the swimmer, he preserved its position with respect to the shore. Not only does the swimmer make a stroke that caresses the surface of the water yet cannot propel her, but she also extends her gesture improbably onto the shore.

That marked relation between swimmer’s stroke and shoreline does more than introduce a second inconsistency into Miró’s representation of the swimmer’s gesture. In fact, given that it is a painting by the fanciful Miró that we have under discussion, the very idea of tallying the inconsistencies in the picture may seem odd. One might be tempted to dismiss them as just part of a general looseness in the way things are constructed and disposed in Miró’s famously child-like world. But it would be wrong always to accept Miró’s “mistakes” as such—especially, in this case, since the mistake in question is deliberate enough to preserve exactly a feature of an earlier, internally consistent, version of the scene (and even deliberate enough to preserve the inconsistency in a preparatory drawing [F.J.M. 636b] that is nearly identical in composition to the finished picture). The mistake does some work in the picture. It underscores, importantly, the continuity of the scumbled background across the shoreline, as if it were in the background—rather than in the water—that the figure swam. Like the unfinished mountain range or the numerals that float in the sky, the swimmer’s stroke replaces a volume in the landscape (the water) with a layer in the picture’s painted surface. And again, as in *The Policeman*, Miró assigns the swimming figure his own task (caressing the background’s surface)—so that I’m tempted to see in the dotted circle drawn by the bather an allegory of Miró’s own action in painting the background.

The swimmer’s gesture extends her body into the thickness of the painting’s surface, just as a swimmer’s stroke extends her body into the water through which

24. Joan Miró, *Catalan Notebooks: Unpublished Drawings and Writings*, presented by Gaëton Picon, trans. Dinah Harrison (New York: Rizzoli International, 1977), p. 73; originally published by Éditions d’Art Albert Skira, Geneva, in 1976.

she passes. In *The Siesta*, the metaphor that makes the allegory of Miró's physical entry into the painting work is one that compares the experience of painting the background of the canvas to the immersion of a swimmer in the water, where the swimmer merges with the medium on her body's horizon. I believe it is in this identification with the swimmer in the tactile translucence of the painting's thickness that one can see Miró's ecstasy and the path he found beyond Cubism.