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Pablo Picasso and Gertrude Stein. Correspondence

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Pablo Picasso and Gertrude Stein. *Correspondence*. Laurence Madeline, ed. Lorna Scott Fox, tr. (Calcutta, London and New York: Seagull, 2018, ISBN: 9780857425850).

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Fragmentation, dissection, explosion: how to characterize the most influentially innovative art—be it theatre, music, literature or painting—of the twentieth century's first half depends on which artistic formation one has in view and how violent or deliberate one takes that formation to have been. Regardless, a splitting open, dismantling or weakening of the bonds between its constituent parts marked that moment's culture, with Gertrude Stein and Pablo Picasso as two of that disintegrative impulse's most influential proponents. Such history might well lead a reader to anticipate scintillating exchanges, crackling with imagination, throughout this collection. After all, this is the Stein of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the Picasso of *Les Femmes d'Alger* and *Guernica*. And a shock does await, but not the kind one might predict. Picasso to Stein, probably April 1912:

Dear Gertrude

I received your letter I already told you that on Thursday we're going to supper with Haviland. I told Braque that we are not coming to yours on Wednesday. When shall we see you then

Fond wishes to you two from us two

Picasso (98)

Aside from the cultural celebrity and influence of both author and recipient, this letter is—truly—unremarkable. Picasso gets slightly impatient ('I already told you...'), or perhaps writes hastily, but either way the note is just two familiars arranging (or not) one of many casual get-togethers. Even

given the correspondents' notoriety, does this scrap merit being archived, let alone anthologized? When this collection first appeared in 2008, the answer was far from clear. '[T]he book will not be of interest to the general reader', Alexander Adams wrote at the time (11–12). Putting a more positive spin on the relentlessly quotidian content of the notes assembled here, Linda Simon observed, 'If this volume fails to satisfy fully enough our curiosity about a famous friendship, it is still a triumph of scholarship'.

Simon might have had in mind Laurence Madeline's prodigious notes (which recall the forensic precision of another feat of Picasso-inspired obsessiveness, *A Day with Picasso*, wherein Billy Klüver uses shadows and other minutiae to identify the date and sequence of 24 photographs taken by Jean Cocteau of Picasso with friends one afternoon in 1916). As a case in point, Madeline appends no fewer than five footnotes to the brief letter that I quote in full above, covering everything from the provenance of the date proposed for the note, to the significance of the Taverne de l'Ermitage (the source of the paper on which Picasso wrote it), to the identities of Frank Burty-Haviland and Georges Braque. And such extensive apparatus accompanies many of this book's entries, from Stein and Toklas acquiring their first dog in 1915, to their art collection being saved from the Nazis by Picasso's quick thinking in 1944 (about which more below) and everything in between.

But why, and for whose benefit? Simon finds that this correspondence does not satisfy our curiosity; Adams says that it is uninteresting for general readers and that non-specialists will find it disappointing. They both mean that little (or no) insight into the participants' emotional lives or aesthetic philosophies intermingles with their dinner arrangements, travel plans and occasional art dealings (Stein having been an important collector of Picasso's art early on). And if such pedestrian matters were of limited interest when this collection appeared in hardcover in 2008, why would they compel greater attention in paperback today? Surely all the experts who need this book have it by now. Moreover, such obsessiveness carries with it the danger of driving what T.J. Clark calls 'the idiotic x-equals-y' biography (4)—by which he means a breathless fascination with every aspect of Picasso's life that ironically undoes itself since the attempt to explain Picasso's artistry by reference to biographical detail leads one away from that art rather than toward it.

However, in the decade since this book's initial release, these objections have been inverted. Not that one now would say that all generalists and amateur enthusiasts must read this book (although, why not?). But if this volume still primarily appeals to experts and specialists, the range of who that community might include has expanded well beyond adepts in the blow-by-blow of Stein's and Picasso's everyday lives. Moreover, this expansion follows from a reconsideration of the worth of such day-to-day

trivia. What made such information recondite a decade ago is what makes it valuable now, on two fronts.

First, life writing scholars like Kylie Cardell, Jane Haggis, Margareta Jolly and Liz Stanley have demonstrated the significance of letters as life writing. Certainly, letters (and other forms of correspondence) can be as canny or disingenuous as any other form of writing: presuming that letters are necessarily sincere and honest is naïve to the point of being counterproductive. At the same time, even short, trivial letters contribute to the expression—or performance—of the self.

Specifically—the second significance—while the minutiae of everyday life certainly can mystify (i.e. by reinforcing that idea that Picasso and Stein's genius was such that even their most trivial acts had world-historical significance), it also can demystify. It can encourage us to rethink the nearly ubiquitous assumption that all that matters—or all that exists—when taking account of a life or a history is what James Scott called 'official culture' (51). A widespread habit of mind foregrounds the icons, triumphs, catastrophes, images and events that crystallize and structure hegemony. But what about the 'hidden transcripts', as Scott calls them (x and *passim*): the conversations, exchanges and gestures that resist the official line, perhaps from subversive or revolutionary intent, perhaps from indifference, but in any case creating friction with the dominant structures? What do we see in the interstices of these texts?

In art history (though evidently not only there), growing attention has focused on the women who existed in the shadows of prominent men: some recent examples among the life writing of Stein's contemporaries include Marie Bashkirtseff's voluminous diaries being published in two complete editions and in a new, expanded English translation, Lucy Ella Rose drawing our attention to the unpublished diaries of Mary Seton Watts and the publication of Ida John's letters. Not that it is news that women and members of other equity-seeking communities have long hovered in the background or shadows around the arts' prominent figures and that, often, these women had artistic talent and aspiration themselves. But repossessing this history underscores the urgency of asking whether these women preferred the shadows or were pushed into them. Given her own literary output—an autobiography to complement the one Stein wrote in her name, two cookbooks, articles in *The New Republic* and *The New York Times*—one might wonder if Toklas chaffed at playing second fiddle. And how happy was Olga Khokhlova to have left Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russe for Picasso when the master's eye resumed its wandering after their son's birth? It certainly seems, from the scant mention accorded partners on both sides, that romantic involvement with either Stein or Picasso came at considerable cost.

Moreover, this unconscious silence has a curious doppelgänger in the absence of any discussion of their political differences. In the fall of 1944, with the Second World War's end still nearly a year away, Picasso very publicly joined the French Communist Party, saying in *L'Humanité*, 'I have come to the Communist Party without the least hesitation, since in reality I was with it all along' (1–2). Stein, by comparison, was more than politically conservative. As Madeline observes in introducing the book's final section (the volume comprises five chronological parts, each with a brief introduction), Stein undertook to translate a book (never published) of speeches by Marshal Philippe Pétain and protested neither Franco's uprising nor the bombing of Guernica, prompting Picasso to brand her a 'pig' and 'fascist' while somehow retaining respect for her judgment (358–359). But nothing in this correspondence gives any sense of any of this, let alone the complex, competing emotions Picasso likely felt as he helped secure Stein's art collection from other 'pigs' and fascists.

Clearly, Adams and Simon were not wrong to be put out by Stein and Picasso's silences on their aesthetic convergences and political differences. Madeline, too, despite her painstaking editing, seems a bit frustrated, hypothesizing that this recalcitrance flowed from Picasso and Stein both feeling uncomfortable with their grasps of written French. And Scott Fox, through the lens of her expert translating, comments that both correspondents have reason to feel unsure of their French.

And we too could be similarly unsure of the value of these letters and postcards to readers today. They're far from the wrenching, mercurial correspondence of Ida John, for example. But the absence of drama—despite the dramatic context—has its own value if we fold this taciturn quality back on itself, take it as a sign of the capability of Picasso and Stein. After all, in this context, they wrote for each other, not us, and they had no need to expound on art, life or politics. That was the point of the conversations that these letters undertook to arrange.

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