Carl Einstein's unique gifts were also his very burden: he was a lyrical poet and writer of experimental prose, as such a participant in the movements of Expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism, as well as an uncompromising critic and theorist of avant-garde productions, including his own. As a theorist he focused more radically than earlier thinkers (Friedrich Nietzsche, Fritz Mauthner, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal) on the limits of symbolic language, the written word with its elevated status in literature, and, ultimately, on the limitations of Western conceptual culture. This particular strand of his thought comes to the fore in the Berlin of the mid-twenties with his writings on modern art, and expands in his contributions to the Parisian avant-garde journal *Documents* (Paris, 1929–30). Moreover, as the first theorist to view African sculpture within the discourse of Cubism, he had already turned in *Negerplastik* (1915) against the abstraction of perspective and narrative in the visual arts. At an extreme, Einstein (the “little Einstein,” his friend the critic and editor Franz Blei, once called him) was to argue against literature—belles lettres—as the culture of subjectivity, of metaphor and interiority, and attempt to theorize an “immediacy” of visual experience. As always is the case with Einstein, his aesthetic views were also reflective of cultural and political conditions, such as the dominance and national identity claims of interiority in the German tradition. These conditions by and large contributed to his permanently leaving Berlin for the eminently congenial cultural climate of Paris in 1928, a year before Walter Benjamin’s temporary move to the French capital. (After 1933, it became the place of political exile for both.) Although they had no dealings with one another, they both had contact with major French intellectuals who were at the core of *Documents* and later the Collège de Sociologie.

At the center of Einstein’s aesthetic theory, as fully developed in the context of his work for *Documents* in Paris, was the notion of contemporary painting (specifically that of Pablo Picasso and André Masson) as “a language.” Thus he was far from any return to the “primordial image,” a mythical vision embraced by Gottfried Benn, his longtime friend, intellectual counterpart, and the foremost representative of German high-modernist Expressionism (with its inherent problematics that were to surface with the rise of Nazism). Like no other art theorist,
Einstein involved himself in a seemingly paradoxical enterprise, an epistemological critique of the “immediacy” of seeing as “seeing knowledge.” He thereby dissociated himself not only from the culture of interiority, but recognized and critiqued the avant-garde claim of origin and renewal as rhetoric even more specifically than Theodor Adorno, who had first in 1920, at the advent of Expressionism, developed his distaste for any avant-garde project to sublate art into life. In spite of a certain affinity of Einstein’s aesthetic theory, notwithstanding fundamental differences, with that of Adorno and Benjamin, his is still quite underexposed even in German or French criticism, and nearly totally unknown in the United States (which makes any essay on Carl Einstein here somewhat of an introductory enterprise, often necessitating ample quotes from his work).

Only relatively recently has the critic been discovered for his significance for cultural and, moreover, textual theory by James Clifford, Denis Hollier, and especially Georges Didi-Huberman, on the basis of his contributions to Documents. In the terms of the latter discussion, I will argue that Einstein here, in the context of Surrealist visual productions and cultural criticism, engages in a radical critique


3. German and French scholarship over the last decades has edited and reintroduced Einstein on an impressive editorial and critical scale for an historical assessment, with scholars such as Hildegard Oehm programmatically advancing, and Liliane Meffre and Klaus H. Kiefer mediating some theoretical along with historical issues in the literary and critical work. See Hildegard Oehm, Die Kunsttheorie Carl Einsteins (Munich: Fink Verlag, 1976); Meffre, Carl Einstein et la problématique des avant-gardes dans les arts plastiques (Bern: Peter Lang, 1989); Kiefer, Diskurswandel im Werk Carl Einsteins. Ein Beitrag zur Theorie und Geschichte der europäischen Avantgarde (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1994). Significant for current research on Einstein is also Meffre’s editorial work: Carl Einstein, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler: Correspondance 1921–1939 (Marseille: André Dimanche, 1993), and La sculpture nègre (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002).

of the institution of literature. He does so in the form of a partially calculated, partially spontaneous excess of polemics against all literature, his chosen target being, most pointedly, the contemporary literary avant-garde! In *nuce*, he attempts to theorize what we today could tentatively address as a “visual turn,” a turn to a visual language against the culture of literary writing. In the same journal, Georges Bataille tends to debunk literary culture (including narrative painting) as the essence of the spirit of modernity, albeit with considerably less rigid epistemological mediation, driven by the desire for a spontaneous opening of the image space as alternative experience (“un coup de vent nocturne qui ouvre une fenêtre”).

Einstein’s turn to a visual language, of course, has its history within the history of the avant-garde. Beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century, modernist and avant-garde literature, jettisoning the tradition of representation, took part within the broader “linguistic turn” in the wake of Nietzsche’s philosophy of language as a critique of the episteme of substantive “reality.” The main thrust of Dada, for example, was the liberation of the linguistic sign from its use and abuse in the service of Western ideologies—releasing the sign from its symbolic work, from its culturally determined bondage to meaning, to its unbounded potential within playful relations of signifiers. Turning experimentally to the materiality of writing as a visual process, individual Dadaists like Hans (Jean) Arp in Zurich or Raoul Hausmann in Berlin were somewhat less interested than others in parodying the mechanisms and ideological abuse of conceptual processes, and more drawn to specifically illuminate psychophysical (as well as aural) experiences within the medium of language. Dada thus was not a disavowal of writing, but, in Gertrude Stein’s words, an “independent dependent.”

As already alluded to elsewhere in a comparative focus on Einstein’s and Bataille’s positions during the end of the 1920s, I claim that an avant-garde turn to a visual language crystallized from within, and, increasingly, against, the “linguistic turn” of modernist

5. See also n. 18. I here choose the term “visual turn” over the concept of a “semiotic turn” as advanced by Norman Bryson for a “transdisciplinary theory,” as well as over W. J. T. Mitchell’s preference for the notion of a “pictorial turn,” as I need to address a variety of “visions” in a range from the physiological process of seeing (with the eyes) to linguistically projected mental and textually formulated processes such as “inner visions” (e.g., in the case of Ludwig Klages as an influence on Walter Benjamin). See Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 11ff., and Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2 (June 1991), pp. 174–208.

6. For a comparison and contrast of Einstein’s with Bataille’s rhetorics, I here cite a longer passage from Bataille’s “*CHRONIQUE*” in *Documents* 8 (1930), p. 51: “C’est la volonté soudaine, intervenant comme un coup de vent nocturne qui ouvre une fenêtre, de vivre, même seulement une ou deux petites minutes, en soulevant tout à coup les tentures qui cachent ce qu’il faudrait à tout prix ne pas voir, c’est une volonté d’homme qui perd la tête, qui peut seule permettre d’affronter brusquement ce que tous les autres fuient. . . . *L’esprit moderne* n’a jamais mis avant que des méthodes applicables à la littérature ou à la peinture. Ou, il est probable que ce qui pourrait lui succéder ne prendrait de sens que sur un tout autre plan.”


literature. The crisis years in the wake of the global economic crash saw the publication of *Documents*, and concurrently in Berlin Benjamin’s essay on “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia.” In this essay, André Breton’s mainstream Surrealism and communist politics as action are charged with the apocalyptic exposure of a “one hundred percent image space,” of a physiological, bodily experience liberated from the restraints of metaphor in literature and politics. The years following the rise of Nazism to power were marked by the politicization of visual culture into the totalitarian spectacle, which in turn provoked Benjamin’s notable treatise concerning “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) as a most extreme position in this spectrum. Benjamin’s treatise valorized the experience of the filmed, mechanically produced and reproduced visual image over literary culture (“belles lettres”), including, however little recognized in the abundant criticism of the essay, the writings of the avant-garde, Futurism, Expressionism, Dada, as well as Surrealism. After all, it was the Surrealist movement that he had previously endowed with messianic energies. Benjamin, pressed by the strongly felt indecision of a “crisis of the arts,” as reflected, for example, in the 1937–38 Expressionism/Modernism debate in *Das Wort* (for which he intended the second version [1937] of the essay), argued, at least temporarily, for a cultural paradigm shift. He argued for a paradigm shift from the traditional media of individual creativity to the collectively and technologically produced visual medium of film, where “an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.” By that time Einstein had already apodictically denounced all avant-garde art in his monumental polemic and auto-da-fé, the “Fabrikation der Fiktionen” (posthumously published), and followed up on his convictions with his commitment to write nothing but political pamphlets or radio and his call to armed action for the anarchist collective in the Spanish Civil War. Benjamin, forcing the issue in his own way, had turned to film for the production of intersubjective consciousness. Yet even here he maintained his position on the imbrication of the verbal and the visual, privileging verbal processes over any signifying potential of the image. By contrast, Einstein had from early on simply bypassed film (except in a single note of extreme ridicule in 1922), and, at the end of the 1920s, he attempted to critique literary culture, including that of the literary avant-garde, from the point of view of avant-garde painting. In that sense, Einstein argues quite conservatively for an individual mode of production, in, moreover, the eminently traditional form of canvas painting. In other words, we may be dealing here with the avant-garde as a widening, experien-

12. See Carl Einstein, “Die Pleite des deutschen Films,” *Der Querschnitt* 2 (1922), p. 191ff; reprinted in Carl Einstein, *Werke*, vol. 2, ed. Marion Schmid et al. (Berlin: Medusa, 1981), pp. 219–22. In view of the fairly advanced discussion of film in Germany during the early 1920s, and compared with, for example, the conservative Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s remarkably differentiated 1921 essay “Der Ersatz für Träume” (“Substitute for Dreams”), Einstein’s essay is among the most elitist, not to say backward-looking, indictments of a medium then in an artistic heyday with its Expressionist productions.
mentally driven process of a system-immanent critique of literary culture (not immediately of the culture of writing per se). Such a process, once put into motion (also by political stimuli and other external shocks), is self-perpetuating and cannot stop short of a system critique that puts one paradigm (literature) altogether into question in favor of another (the visual arts, or, in the extreme, the technological medium of film).

Documents saw itself as a journal for “Archéologie, Beaux-Arts, Ethnographie, Variétés,” provocatively omitting literature from its vision. With Bataille and Michel Leiris criticizing Breton’s Surrealist project as idealist, it privileged painting, photography, and filmed images, as well as the visual productions of mass culture from popular journals and the sensationalist boulevard press—totally outside of Einstein’s personal scope—over literary culture. Lest one concede and attribute to Bataille the role of mastermind of Documents, it should be noted that Einstein more succinctly developed long-standing ideas, rather than gaining altogether new insights into painting as a “language.”

An assessment of the Cubist phase of Picasso and Georges Braque constitutes a substantive core of Einstein’s Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts. Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts is a precocious, monumental study of twentieth-century European avant-garde painting, which exudes an unstated, uncanny certainty—less than two decades after the prewar aesthetic revolution in Vienna, Paris and Berlin—that the major artistic developments of the age are already in place for such a summary review. This study—which was to give Einstein a position of leadership in advanced German art criticism circles (a position formerly attributed to Wilhelm Hausenstein) and establish him as an expert in modernist art—had already laid most of the groundwork for his critical project of “making seeing conscious” (“Bewußtmachung des Sehens”). Three years later, as Bataille’s coeditor and contributor to Documents, Einstein once more reviews Cubism, and devotes another essay to Braque’s and two more essays to Picasso’s later work. In his contributions to the French journal, the epistemological issue of the forms of visuality comes to the boiling point. Most notably, there is an exemplary first essay on Masson’s paintings that cause Einstein to review, or at least to modify, some of his most stable formal criteria, such as the “tectonic” element in avant-garde productions. Here Masson’s latest semi-automatic work is assessed as the most extreme experiment to

produce forms which manifestly articulate the visual unconscious. The author must indeed have felt that with these antinarrative paintings something different had set in that he had not seen as clearly before. Consequently, in the third edition of Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts, which appeared in 1931, a year after the cessation of Documents, he adds a section on the painter. The third edition of this study is notably marked by a pattern of recomposition, rewriting, and reformulation that must also be attributed to Einstein’s encounter with the “Surrealist ethnographical” vision which marked Bataille’s and Leiris’s input into Documents. In its often more strongly worded attack on a “repugnant idealism” (“ekelhafter Idealismus” [Kunst 3, p. 92]), its reinforced anthropological perspective on the relation of modern to primitive art (Kunst 3, p. 134), and its pointedly more tangible criticism of Freud’s narrative model of the unconscious, the 1931 edition of Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts must indeed be read as a significantly different version.

Hence, Einstein after 1929 goes into significant detail theorizing in his differentiated—albeit often idiosyncratic—terms a visual unconscious, as it is articulated for him by the painters close to Documents. He now goes so far as to defy Freud’s scientific, conceptual—in that sense metaphorical, and hence, as he puts it himself, “metaphysical”—construction of the unconscious. The substantially revised third version of Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts thus also takes a significant step beyond Freud by focusing on Picasso’s creative attempt (beginning with the early Cubist stage) to overcome, as Einstein puts it in the 1930 Documents essay on Picasso, the “la fatalité de l’inconscient” (“Verhängnis des Unbewußten” [Kunst 3, pp. 115]). Between then and 1931, Einstein had thus significantly turned to a critique of Freud’s translation of the dream image—the image sphere of the bodily unconscious—into written discourse (the focus of the concluding part of my essay). In these terms, Einstein’s overall aim was nothing less than to critically deconstruct—by way of a review of modern art history as the history of “la lutte de toutes les expériences optiques” (the battle of all optical experiences)—the metaphysical dualism of subject versus object, “inner” versus “outer,”


18. See also n. 5. I here employ the term “visual unconscious” over the term “optical unconscious” as the wider of the two. The technical concept of an “optical unconscious” applies to the physiological premises of seeing, ranging from the makeup of the retina to the muscular movements that underlie the movement of our eyes in processes of seeing—thus optical processes of which we are unconscious in the act of vision, as analyzed by Ernst Mach in Analyse der Empfindungen (Leipzig, 1906). The concept of a “visual unconscious” is to entail an “optical unconscious” as defined, but also to cover the fact that seeing is simultaneously a mental, formal act that takes place in the medium of imaginary forms (which Einstein himself refers to as “tectonic”) that are not yet adapted to the symbolic order of forms that generate the visual construction of objects. Einstein himself utilizes sehen (“to see, to visualize”) mostly as a more comprehensive term, and optisch mostly for the physiological dimensions of seeing, but on principle he does not decide for a distinction. For instance, in talking about optische Erfahrung he sometimes uses (like Benjamin, but not as consistently) the term Erfahrung for wider experience than that of a narrower subjective Erlebnis, thus in this instance giving more of a depth to optisch.


the constructs of a metaphorical, spiritual, or mental versus Benjamin’s psychophysiological world of the image space.  

**Beyond the Linguistic Turn of the Avant-Garde?**

The dissident Surrealists, most prominently Bataille and Leiris, turned to what Einstein (originator of the idea and with Bataille cofounder of the journal of “Archéologie, Beaux-Arts, Ethnographie, Variétés”) called an “Ethnologie du Blanc.”  

In spite of mounting differences between Bataille (with his programmatic “low materialism”) and Einstein (relegated to “directeur en titre”), a common aim was to constitute a critical vantage point for viewing and reviewing Western institutions ranging from art to politics, from architecture to literary writing—including avant-garde writing—relative to the base of premodern and prehistorical collective productions and life forms. The paradigm for a culture without linear writing was the visual language of African, Oceanic (Einstein’s particular area of interest), and Mesoamerican art.  

Documents’ perspective on the physiological materiality of primitive art, avant-garde painting and photography (for example, J. A. Boiffard’s images of spittle or a spitting mouth, or of a big toe with erased contours and dimensions defining a whole) that jars modernist grand narratives can be counted among the eminent marks of a postmodern vision. In valuing the visual image over the modern written word—painting over literature—and in the quest for theorizing experience freed from the constraints of subjectivity, Einstein discarded as relatively outdated the “linguistic turn” modernist and avant-garde writing had taken since Stéphane Mallarmé. Only a closer reading of his contributions to the journal reveals to us that the theorist and poet often intertwines the epistemological level of his arguments with an emotive dimension. In his essay “André Masson: An Ethnological Study” (1929), Einstein outrageously radicalizes the much more balanced epistemological commentaries of Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts concerning the relation of writing and painting. This later work is an outright polemic that dismisses an entire generation of avant-garde writers: “In this generation the literati are wearily limping behind the painters. Only the latter dared to alter traditional grammar. The scriveners, however, waded with unspoiled confidence in the swamps of syntax. . . . At best they went as far as changing an adjective.” This refers to the generation of Breton, born like Masson in 1896, and no grace is offered to any “scrivener” in the “swamps of syntax.” No exceptions are made, not even for James Joyce (though by his birth in 1882 a member of the previous generation), the figure-head and center of Eugène Jolas’s *transition* and that

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journal’s “Revolution of the Word,” to which Einstein would sign his name in “Poetry Is Vertical” (1932).

“These writers . . . believed in language . . . are prisoners of words.” And he means that an entire generation of writers of the avant-garde have profited from submitting their creativity to the institution of literature as a “mont-de-piété” (pawnshop). And Einstein maintains that these writers, compared with the avant-garde painters in the wake of Cubism, have regressed. He accuses them of having failed to “parier la tête” (“risk one’s head” in the twofold sense of “risking”—using or losing one’s head) for the sake of the desired experience of “immediacy.” Apart from some minor tinkering with adjectives, the “literati” are said to have failed to shake up the psychological hierarchies” of the written word, and thus submitted to a narrow rationalist psychological perspective: “Who, however, would question the hierarchy of psychological values and logic itself?” How are we to understand such strained misrepresentation of the literary avant-garde, whose linguistic experiments, which left no aspect of language unturned, go back to Mallarmé? In fact, Mallarmé is the only writer exempt from Einstein’s indictment, as he acknowledges his “courageous” transgression of the “Literarisch Dekorative” (in “Un Coup de Dés”) toward the visual qualities of the constellation of writing and blank space on the page; therefore the poet supposedly has remained “misunderstood or unknown” (Kunst 3, p. 156). Here it may be quite telling that Einstein’s own Parisian writing, his experimental novel “Bébéquin II”—with which he also wanted to jettison the German cultural heritage of interiority—is in obsessive search of such “immediacy,” and it fails, of course, to come to terms with it. The result of the failure is that the author of the impossible quits literature altogether, with a final long poem (“Design of a Landscape”), desperately self-conscious about the “blindness” of its language as no other work in world literature. Such intense personal experience and involvement with the issue of “immediacy” in the medium of writing, and not Bataille’s or Leiris’s influence, must have contributed to the circumstance in which Einstein, the writer manqué, goes beyond the literary Surrealists’ professed antiliterary stance (which, in fact, was more directed against literary genre, like the novel, than literature as a “writing system”). After all, the mainstream Surrealists valorized the primacy of language: “After you, dearest language” (as Benjamin quotes Breton in his Surrealism essay). Yet Einstein in Documents programmatically (and perhaps symptomatically) chooses to also ignore an entire tradition of avant-garde linguistic experimentation, including that from Guillaume Apollinaire’s “calligrammes” to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s “ideograms,” which are, at least partially, based on a semiology of the image, as they disrupt, if not disallow, linear reading.

25. Ibid.
It is important for understanding Einstein in historical, philosophical, and theoretical contexts to note that he does not argue for a purist form of visuality per se, which would make him a conventional advocate of “abstract art” (as much later, in the aftermath of World War II, Clement Greenberg was in his writings on abstract expressionism). In fact, he is, as far as I can see, the earliest critic of the avant-garde cult of (and myth of) purity. Always drawn to extremes, he does privilege the image over the word (in reverse of Benjamin’s valuation), but he does not envision any severing of the visual from a language of signification; the image is a gesture, and as such, a sign showing itself as a sign. Nor does Einstein critique written language in favor of sound as embraced by the “phonocentric” romantics (such as Jacques Derrida). But he does turn against literary language as the privileged language of the culture of writing. And in his aversion to the institution of literature as a medium for the idea of a national education or edification with universal claims (the German word for education being Bildung—from Bild, meaning image—which implies a fulfilling of a norm rather than the realizing of the potential of the imagination), he most readily shares common ground with Bataille and the members of the later Collège de Sociologie. For him, literature as an institution has turned into stereotype and exclusion, any linguistic text being, to begin with, always already a narrow translation of sensorial perceptions into a “completely other sphere,” as Nietzsche had critiqued language in his early essay “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense” (1873). At that point, Einstein may, indeed, have gone too far—at any rate beyond the early Nietzsche, who turns to an elite of youthful poets in valorizing the intuitive processes of linguistic experimentation for a renewal of experience that dialectically adjusts the memory of history in favor of life. At any rate, the aestheteic Einstein finds himself unable to return to any form of alphabetic script, avant-garde or not. Clearly, he has become unable to reflexively renegotiate as ineluctable the “violence of the letter” (Derrida’s phrase). Thus he insists that the liberation from the superego of literary experience, from the subjectivity of metaphor, began with the Cubist painters: “They separated the image from the object, thus canceled memory”—meaning the history of modern man and symbolic language.

Specifically in art-historical terms, Einstein adumbrated the discussion of the significance of the “grid” in the visual arts, and he simultaneously developed a profound understanding of what scholars such as Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss,
or Georges Didi-Huberman today address as the *informe* in avant-garde art, a term that beyond its historical roots in the thought of Bataille and Leiris has become a highly refined contemporary critical theorem.31 For these critics (as for Einstein in his very own terms), the grid and the *informe* are forms of seeing that deal with unconscious vision in relation to manifest forms. The grid does so by duplicitously repressing traditional spiritual symbolism (the cross, for example, or other holistic icons) under the guise of material, geometrical, closed forms such as the square or circle as elemental. The *informe*—on the other pole of aesthetic form—desublimates and reveals, and thus lays bare, the material, physiological base of imaginary formal processes as open. Compared with Einstein’s differentiated epistemological approach to the relation of image to language in *Documents*, subject to a close reading here, Bataille’s as well as Leiris’s definition of the *informe* in the journal rests largely in a language-image of compare and contrast. For Bataille, the *informe* is the other of a classificatory dictionary or philosophical term in the sense that it points to the particular and unique: “Ainsi *informe* n’est pas seulement un adjectif ayant tel sens mais un term servant à déclasser, exigeant généralement que chaque chose ait sa forme.” Therefore the *informe* is heterogeneous “like a spider or spittle”: “Par contre affirmer que l’univers ne ressemble a rien et n’est qu’*informe* revient à dire que l’univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat.”32 Leiris focuses on the very forms of transgression that jar the familiar, again in the relatively conventional language of comparisons, whence, e.g., spittle becomes the essential sign for the *informe*: “an other . . . a comic tadpole, puffed up, a demigod”: “Le crachat est enfin, par son inconsistence, ses contours indéfinis, l’imprécision relative de sa couleur, son humidité, le symbole même de l’*informe*, de l’inverifiable, du non-hiérarchisé . . . .” It is an “autre chose . . . comique têtard qui se gonfle en viande soufflée de demi-dieu . . . .”33

However addressed rhetorically, both forms, the grid and the *informe*, are seen to be constituted as resistant to the interference of linear, temporal language—to narrative as history. They thus construct an autonomous space, autotelic, split off from the world of objects and the perspective of the subject. In such terms one understood the grid (from Kazimir Malevich to Piet Mondrian to Sol LeWitt, for example) as a function of presymbolic antinarrative. This device, however, stagnates and rigidifies from an elemental, material form—due to its readily available repetition in art historical relations—into its opposite, a stereotype of origin.

32. From Bataille’s entry for the *informe* within the rubrique of “CHRONIQUE,” *Documents* 7 (1929), p. 382.
Turned into a marker of a certain concept of art, it has lost its potential as a means of formal exploration. In short, the grid, as Krauss points out, constructs a myth of the identity of the modern.34 Already for Einstein, such privileging of elemental—yet fully developed and thus static form—was but a formalized stereotype of origin. As such it is superimposed on the canvas, rather than working from the very materiality of the canvas. In other words, it is, after all, a form of antinarrative narrative; in short, a form of abstracted writing. In his Documents essay on Braque’s work of 1929, for example, Einstein addresses—in the work of artists other than his chosen painters—the phenomenon of the “grid” as a “stencil” (poncif), a calculated pattern of a “cunning primitivism”: “The moralists of the pure form preach, full of mathematical intoxication, the square. Their program desperately resembles a metaphysical play with words. We know the stencil of deep purity, the absolute of the boarding schools. . . .”35 In other words, Einstein already recognized certain visual forms, such as the square, as forms of a modernist rhetoric repressing and covering up its edifying ideological base by a formalized pretense of origin. Hence he goes as far as to regard such rhetoric as tantamount to a “metaphysical play with words.” Certain stock modernist visual forms are explicitly equated with the conceptuality of words, with “metaphysical” language—“metaphysical” since such language subordinates the material “vielfältige Struktur unserer Körpererfahrungen” (Kunst 3, p. 99) to the service of subjective representation. On the other hand, it is this material “manifold structure of our bodily experience” that shows itself in the medium of Picasso’s and Masson’s painting. Thus there are present in Picasso’s work of the late 1920s “psychological elements that are not yet adapted.”36 In short, in Einstein’s terminology, advanced avant-garde painting takes on experimental risks (“risking the head”) in producing the experience of free images, “éléments imaginaires non adaptés . . . invérifiables.”37 Jettisoning literary language, Einstein uncovers in avant-garde painting unadapted and unverifiable imaginary elements, which Jacques Lacan some seven years later will address as the “unsymbolized Imaginary.”38

As the result of the artist’s creative transgression of psychological schemata, “these images are devoid of commentary,” or against literature. In the essay on Masson, Einstein finally seems to “risk his (own) head,” as he ventures to speak of

37. Ibid., p. 35 (*Werke 3*, p. 476).
“psychologically direct signs,” in other words, of visual gestures that, indeed, would present an “unmediated experience” of the “immediate human being.”39 And such was the task with which had overburdened his own contemporaneous struggling literary practice. In these terms and contexts, the informe constitutes Einstein’s critical basis for perceiving a visual turn of the avant-garde as a turn to a visual language.

“Picasso’s enchanted hand”—Einstein’s verformen as the informe

Already in his Negerplastik (1915), well before he encounters Bataille’s programmatic anti-idealistic stance, triggered by his first personal encounter with Cubist developments in Paris, Einstein had called attention to a crisis of idealist perceptions. He already then had pointed to the intervention of material, physiological processes that can no longer be ignored for the understanding of the aesthetic experience.40 Extending certain antiperspective, physiological theorems (derived from Ernst Mach, one of Einstein’s early decisive influences) in Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts, our body is subsequently expressly addressed as a “first transmitter” of perceptual sensations (Kunst, p. 61). In the context of a utilitarian life and world, these perceptual sensations are subjectively dedifferentiated and absorbed into unifying normative perceptions. Aesthetic productions in general, however, differentiate; avant-garde productions, specifically, as Einstein writes in 1926, verformen, or defamiliarize forms (Kunst, p. 61; Kunst 3, p. 98). Successful avant-garde productions defamiliarize and formally transgress any apperception of identity.41 The term verformen hence is quite consciously used in contrast to the slogan “Deformation” (Kunst 3, p. 93), one of the going stereotypes for denigrating modernist, nonrepresentational productions that would in Germany feed into the National Socialist, antimodernist ideological repertoire.

The crisis of the self-identical, well-formed self, the subject as the inside, is by this token correspondingly the crisis or, as Einstein writes, the “catastrophe,” of the outside, the well-formed object. Such crisis of representation is induced by the intervention of bodily experiences as (initially) unconscious experiences. In that sense, Einstein attacks the writers for their insistence on subjectivity, the “petrified unified I” (Kunst 3, p. 105), or “the head.” Einstein’s point of view here is obviously comparable to Bataille’s acéphalı project (for which Masson was to later paint the group’s emblem, the acéphale), the body without head, yet illuminated in clairvoyant insight into itself.42

41. See Didi-Huberman, La Ressemblance Informe ou le Gai Savoir Visuel selon Georges Bataille, p. 22.
42. Mason later sketches the image of the headless body for the frontispiece of Bataille’s journal Acéphale (June 1936–June 1939).
The *informe* is, however, by no means to be misunderstood as the opposite of form.43 Rather, the opposite of the *informe* is the ornament, a favorite target for Einstein (*Kunst*, p. 61; *Kunst* 3, p. 99) after Alfred Loos’s 1908 attack on the ornament “as a crime”—indicted as uncreative, deceptive decoration in the service of hierarchies.44 In *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* Einstein also uses a variant formulation for the process of his *verformen* (the *informe*): the “hallucinatory-tectonic.” This combinatory terminology allowed him to refer to the intertwined energies of sensorily based dissolution and formal construction without having to take recourse any longer to Nietzsche’s Apollonian/Dionysian complex. After all, for the post-Expressionist interwar era, Nietzsche’s notion had become too much of a backward-looking cultural idol, tied to antiquity rather than applicable to modernity. For the same reason, Benn, for example, was to freely borrow from Einstein for his own understanding of the “hallucinatory-constructive” dimension of the poetic process.

The generic, overall term “tectonic,” for Einstein, is to cover the whole range of “compelling,” “strictly tectonic,” or “statically firm,”45 in the sense of its classical usage (*Kunst* 3, p. 165), to the modernist notion of a “halluzinativ Formale” (all at the occasion of Cubist developments, *Kunst* 3, p. 95).46 But clearly it is the radicality of Masson’s work that pushes Einstein’s definition of the tectonic from a tradition-oriented center toward the margin of the *informe* as an open process: “The tectonic, which too quickly hinders the process and forces a prejudiced selection, is hardly still registered or valued; at the most, it functions as a damper in a too rapid compulsion of processes” (*Kunst* 3, p. 167).47 Obviously, this extreme view of the tectonic as mere resistance to fluidity, which informs the significantly changed version of *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* of 1931, is the result of Einstein’s activities in the context of *Documents*, where he first writes on Masson. Where “one image really is a streaming into another”(*Kunst*, p. 80), this process of flux—likened with Braque to “the drinking of boiling petroleum” (*Kunst*, p. 73)—

43. See Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance Informe ou le Gai Savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, p. 22: “Rosalind Krauss a montré comment l’informe bataillien n’était pas du tout ‘le contraire’ de la forme, que la forme par conséquent n’y était pas ‘le contraire’ de la matière, et qu’en réalité la valeur de bouleversement visée dans le terme informe correspondait souvent à la mise en œuvre d’un ‘procédé spatial spécifique’: gros plan, contre-plongée, rotation ou renversement à 180 degrés, forme rendue floue, érodée, recadrée, ‘invasion’ de l’objet par son espace environnement…”
46. “Tektonek heißt: Bezwingung der erlebt bewegten Kontraste auf eine formale durable Einheit, in der das Erlebnis des Volumens bildmäßig gestaltet ist” (*Kunst*, p. 81). Or, assessing the Cubist work of Picasso, Braque, and Gris, Einstein addresses the tectonic as a “formal durable unity” of the finished aesthetic product (*Kunst*, p. 81). In the 1931 version, the “tectonic” is more specifically and flexibly defined as a function of seeing in “Typen des Schauens” (types of vision/seeing) in spatial relations: “Unter dem Tektonischen verstehen wir die über die Objekte hinaus geltenden Elemente des Raum erlebnisses, wobei wir Element als generelle Form definieren” (*Kunst* 3, p. 118f.).
47. “Das Tektonische, das allzu rasch den Prozess hemmt und eine vorgefäßte Auslese erzwingt, wird kaum noch gewertet, höchstens als Stauung im allzu rapiden Zwang der Prozesse.”
becomes defined as the encounter of formal metamorphotic processes with marginal forms of the Other. 48 Besides Masson’s, it is notably Picasso’s work in which “one image means for him a streaming into the Other, the still alien” (Kunst 3, p. 124). 49 Avant-garde painting is perceived as the most advanced site of a semiautomatic encounter with the unconscious of the body.

Such semiautomatic, ecstatic yet not unconscious, creativity hence is an activity within physiological, material, and formal rather than a priori mental (never “inner” or “spiritual”) relations. Einstein saw this already in Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts (1926, expressly in the 1931 version) when assessing the Cubist work of art (Kunstwerk) literally as a form of “handwork” (Kunst 3, p. 113). Its forms are a function of the artist’s psychophysiological relations of the seeing eye and the “enchanted” hand (Kunst, p. 71). 50 Holding and guiding in unison the brush to the medium of the canvas and paint, the “enchanted hand of Picasso” explores the surface, producing an “image-body” (Kunst, p. 64; Kunst 3, p. 95) in “tactile translucence.” 51 Hence, Einstein writes (in the anti-idealist, “acéphalic” language of Bataille): “The convention of the spine has thus ended.” 52 This is to mean the end of perspective as visual narrative and writing as literature (including Freud’s translations of the image realm into the scientific discourse of psychoanalysis). Einstein’s aesthetic “Ethnologie du Blanc” thus turns against the culture of homo sapiens, constructed by the uniform valorization of the vantage point of upright posture and the monocular sight brain, in the evolution from material physiological beginnings to symbolic endings.

“Painting as a Language. Why Not?” Toward the “Unsymbolized Imaginary”

Moreover, Masson’s painting—as a most advanced visual language—is opposed to written language as much as its images are for Einstein “just about a form of speaking” (Kunst 3, p. 167). This understanding may be similar to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s valorization of spoken over written language (as critiqued by Derrida), but never decisively formulated as such, since the target remains literary writing, not clearly writing as such. At any rate, Masson’s painting is seen as akin to fluidly spoken language, as it seems to mark for Einstein a form of “arche-writing” (Derrida’s term). In other words, painting is not pure visuality, as it consists of references to objects in traces. It is at this point that Einstein attempts to theorize markers of a visual idea that function like “spoken words” (Worte, not written Wörter) in the spontaneity and fluidity of speech: “Wherein parts of objects, mark-

48. “... ein Bild ist eben ein Strom ins andere.” “Es ist als trinke man kochendes Petroleum.”
49. “... ein Bild heißt ihn Strom ins Andere, noch Fremde.”
ers of ideas, surface like words” (*Kunst* 3, p. 167). His theorems, not always unequivocal, here invite, if not compel, a comparison with Lacan’s later view of the role of the subject in its encountering the unconscious as “structured like a language.” For example, Einstein perceives Picasso’s images as the product of a “construction (via) a tectonic hallucination,” the result of the “crossings of psychological processes that are directed by the artist.” “Painting as a Language. Why Not?” Einstein asks provocatively.

For Lacan, whose close relationship to the Surrealists predates his psychoanalytical-linguistic theories by about a decade, language likewise “permits (the subject) to consider itself as the engineer, or the *metteur en scène* of the entire Imaginary capture of which he could not be otherwise than the living marionette.” For both Einstein and later Lacan, the relation of the image space to consciousness and the unconscious therefore is one of dynamic semiotic interrelations. In Einstein’s case, however, the path to be followed is in reverse of later Lacan’s—from the conceptually conscious, the symbolic order, to the visual unconscious, the “unsymbolized Imaginary.”

We are here consequently dealing with a turn to the visual as a prelogical experience, but not in any idealist, visionary sense. Rather, Einstein’s embrace of a language of the visual over the linguistic valorizes a sensorial and psychophysiological experience of the eye (or the eyes as relatively independent from each other’s singular field of perception, as he had already observed in *Negerplastik*). In their “incoherent optical movements,” the eyes produce a series of nonidentical “tectonic analogies.” Thus the formal relations of the *informe* are independent from a subjectively constructed reality of a material outside versus an inside. Modern art from Paul Cézanne to Picasso, for Einstein, obviously opposes a monolithically “architectonic,” reductive construction of “natural” three-dimensional seeing, of experience subjugated by perspective. Thus Einstein’s (and by extension Bataille’s) vision amounts to a revision of vision, which I here view contrary to Martin Jay’s thesis of the denigration of the eye in French critical culture. On the contrary, we are dealing with an “écrasement” of the conceptual by the visual image, in terms of an entwinement of the imaginary with semiotic relations.

53. “ungefähr ein Sprechen, worin Teile von Objekten, Vorstellungsmerkmale, wie Worte, auftauchen.”
55. “Exposition de collages (Galerie Goemans),” p. 244.
Einstein here speaks of “image bodies” (*Kunst*, p. 64; *Kunst* 3, p. 95), of *Gestalten* as “knot phases of functions” (*Kunst* 3, p. 94), phenomena later addressed by Lacan as “corporeal images” and “semiotic knots.”62 Yet we must not confuse these views with a rhetoric of origin. In fact, Einstein sees his position as opposed to regression, theorizing with Hegel a “dialectical negation of nature” and of natural seeing, as well as consequently, against Hegel, an experience beyond the subjectivity of the symbol.63 Einstein’s avant-garde painting subverts the formation of general representational structures, and undercuts the image’s potential for representability, thus barring a translation, a deciphering of the images into the discourse of interpretation. With the work of painters like Picasso and Masson, painting has developed a *dynamische syntax* of a “new language” (*Kunst*, p. 76). For Einstein it is these individuals’ creativity, specifically painting (rather than the collective technological production of film, as it was later for Benjamin), that has become the most advanced medium of a “making conscious of seeing” (*Kunst*, p. 81).64

**Vs. Freud’s “Fatality of the Unconscious”**

From this semio-ontological position Einstein also attempts to critique Freud. In its relatively late translation into French, Freud’s work was a still acute influence on Surrealism. In *Nadja* (1928), Breton appears to submit to Freud’s insights into “the production of dream images,” applying the notion of “super determinancy” for the understanding of his own dreams, as well as of the bad plays that the Surrealists enjoyed attending. Yet he has previously cautioned that the merits of psychoanalysis do not extend to the experience of chance and its revolutionary potential, however indeterminate, for a unique significance of the self in relation to the worlds of objects and people.65 In contrast to Breton, Einstein unambiguously criticizes the psychoanalyst as an exponent of the modernist attempt to “translate,” and thus domesticate, the images of the unconscious in the “house of language”—within the writing system of the symbolic order. In that sense, psychoanalysis is under attack as representing the scientific written discourse of the unconscious as much as literary modernism and the literary avant-garde are targeted for their turning the unconscious into the metaphorical language of literature.

The translation of the image from the unconscious to the rational symbolic, from one sphere to another, had been the aim of Freud’s analysis of dreams. Einstein’s writing on Picasso in the first edition of his *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* had focused extensively on the artist’s ability to split himself from the “fatal bondage through things” (*Kunst*, p. 79),66 and thereby gain access to the unused

64. “Bewußtmachen des Sehens.”
66. “fatale Bindungen durch die Dinge.”
forms of a dreamlike vision, and find the techniques to express the experiences of his “waking dreams” (Kunst, p. 70) in a mode of heightened consciousness (“supralucid precision,” Kunst, p. 71).67 The substantially revised third version goes a significant step further by focusing on the artist’s creative attempt, in his Cubist stage, to overcome the “Fatalität des Unbewußten” (Kunst 3, pp. 115, 135). Between 1926, where his equation of Picasso’s “waking dreams” with the creative state of mind still matches Freud’s understanding of the creative process, and 1931, Einstein had thus significantly shifted to a critique of Freud.68 In fact, his two essays on Picasso in Documents turn, as closely read above, against Freud’s “metaphysical” construct of the “fatality of the unconscious.”69 Here Einstein goes far beyond the critique of the rationalist perspective by also critiquing the Freudian critique of Cartesian subjectivity. Picasso and the Surrealist painters’ psychophysiological “will to form” allows the unconscious to show itself as the hallucinatory-tectonic informe: “Picasso does not accept the object as given, that which the weak worship still as a transcendental substance. With him, we escape Freud’s fatalistic and stable hallucination, this limited form, in which the unconscious is represented in a metaphysical way and as a lasting substance.”70 The difference from Freud here, on which Einstein insists, is that the psychoanalyst developed a language in which the forms of the unconscious could be interpreted in rational terms by the rational subject, terms which establish the unconscious as being “elsewhere,” as the “mass of repression” (in that sense “metaphysical” and “stable”).71 In other words, Einstein here turns against Freud’s understanding and definition of the “unconscious as a language” as much as he sees it (as Jean Starobinski will put it decades later in an essay on Freud and Breton) as “a language only to the interpreter who makes it speaks.”72 As such, for Einstein the Freudian unconscious is the construct of a “limited formula,” of conceptual origin, meaning a “limited intellectual hallucination.” Thus the scientific approach to the world, to nature, and here to the unconscious, is said to generate merely a “world of rational and (therefore) nearly arbitrary signs,” a world of “worn out” signs.73

Freud himself, actually, became quite aware of his “intellectual scaffolding,” as he called it.74 And he would critique the “limitation of our science” (which

67. “überhelle(r) Präzision.”
70. “Pablo Picasso. Quelques tableaux de 1928,” p. 35; Werke, p. 476: “Picasso n’accept pas les choses données, ce que les faibles adorent encore comme une substance transcendentale. On sort avec lui de l’hallucination fataliste et stable de Freud, formule limitée dans laquelle l’inconscience est représenté, d’une manière métaphysique, comme une substance constante.”
Einstein addresses as a “limited formula” or “limited intellectual hallucination”) in one of his last texts, published in 1938: “Because we see that everything that we have newly discovered has to be translated, after all, into the language of our perception, from which we are, indeed, unable to free ourselves.” In other words, Freud himself was to become quite critical of the linguistic determination and limitation of our understanding as “translation.” Likewise he went on record admitting that for the scientific observer, the scope of “observation” would always already be set for a defined purpose, for the “interpretation of the empirical.” And, he added self-consciously, that “gaps in the psychical” (for Einstein’s Picasso or Masson the space of the “unadjusted imaginary elements” of the informe as the very opening of vision for vision) would be “completed via closely connected conclusions and translated into conscious material.” While Freud himself does raise these questions, they must stay marginal in his writings, which are, after all, a record of his practical activities. Freud, of course, knows exactly what he wants, namely: “What interests me is the separation of what would otherwise flow together in some type of primordial mush.”

Equally determined in the semiotics of “primordial mush,” Einstein placed the Surrealist painters’ works as “dynamic” beyond Freud’s “static” view of the unconscious, precisely because they focus their vision beyond the margins of literary culture. Most centrally, however, Surrealist painting contradicts, besides his ultimately “linguistic approach to the image,” Freud’s Kantian insistence that “the real will always remain ‘unknowable.’” Hence the difference, also, from Freud’s carefully assessed potential of scientific insight into the relationship of the outer and inner realm for changing the “exterior world.” By contrast, Einstein wants to believe in Surrealism’s “strong activation of the unconscious in the seeing and creation of the forms” (Gestalten) as a dynamic factor. Thus, as he writes in his great treatise on Braque from the early 1930s, “it is actually the unconscious in which there is the chance of the new, as this is continuously reconstituting itself and thus appears to be progressively disposed.” By contrast, Freud and later...


78. Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salome, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1966), p. 36: “Was mich interessiert, ist die Scheidung und Gliederung dessen, was sonst in einem Ubrbei zusammenfließen würde.”


81. Ibid., p. 52.

82. “Wir hingegen glauben, daß gerade in diesem Unbewussten die Chance des Neuen ruht, dieses dauernd sich umbildet und somit progressiv gestellt sein kann. Diese starke Aktivierung des Unbewussten
Lacan privilege conceptually produced reality as the culturally operative norm. Einstein instead maintains that “through the notion of the unconscious one reacts to the self which is historically too overburdened and can only produce variances.” And Einstein wants to endow avant-garde productions like Picasso’s and Masson’s with the epistemological power that comes from defamiliarization: “It is less the force of the presentation, which amounts to the value of the images, but the turning away from reality. So that one can question the things.” In other words, in the words of Félix Guattari, “the unconscious is not a theatre, but a factory.” T. J. Clark appears to have blinded himself to this aspect of an aesthetics of production in Einstein’s view of Picasso when he defines his own view of modernism that “will not let go of what the artist sees,” as opposed what the critic sees. At any rate, Einstein clearly identifies the function and value of avant-garde productions in terms of the disturbance of the symbolic order toward an underlying insight into seeing itself. He does so by viewing the informe’s performance of “silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse,” which the “stencil” (grid) merely claims symptomatically in its metaphysical and mythical terms.

Einstein dares to “risk his head,” while in praise of these painters as “risking their head[s]”; hence his affinity to Bataille’s project of the acéphale. He himself “risks his head” in programmatically rejecting all literary language as idealistic. He thus embraces the “hallucinatory constructive” image realm, the Imaginary, as “the real” (the distinct focus of his essay on Braque). In short, his terms focus on the image as an informe, as a form of a conscious/unconscious subversion of the symbolic order fabricating the stereotype “reality.”

From a wider scope, Einstein’s turn to avant-garde painting over avant-garde writing may be assessed as a reaction to the circumstance that since the turn of the century writers and psychoanalysts—from Vienna around 1900 to Paris in the 1920s—had formed a close relationship on the basis of the philosophical discourse comparable only to that of the poets and thinkers in Germany around 1800. The cooperation of philosophers and writers had marked the identity of a classical, Romantic epoch. And it might be said that the major writers of modernism, in varying degrees of affinity to the discourse of psychoanalysis, matched...
the significance of this authoritative era by the end of the 1920s in France. Rudimentarily stated, their achievement was the translation of the unruly realm of images into script, and the transcription of the resistance of sensual-physiological experience to the norms of rationalism and realism into the grand récit of an epochal change, that of “modernism.” Critically stated, they had done so by domesticating the unconscious within the “system of writing,” where images disappear in the rhetorical-scriptural, albeit that of the avant-garde.\(^9\) And while the avant-garde had professed the overthrow of the institution of literature, it had become the vehicle of expanding the reach of that institution. If the significance of modernist culture lies in its “linguistic turn” to the unconscious, Einstein in Documents appears driven to surpass it. His is a critical step, critical in the double sense of also reflecting a perceived failure of his own literary experiment in the very years 1929–30, and in terms of an epistemological advance, compensatory or not, toward theorizing a latent culture of a language of the image uncovered from the hegemonic restrictions of the literary word. To be postmodern, one must be consciously primitive.

\(^9\) Kittler, Aufschreibesysteme, p. 347.