

Michael FitzGerald • Colloque Picasso Sculptures • 24 mars 2016

My return to the project of the monument to Apollinaire after several decades of working on other aspects of Picasso's oeuvre is prompted by the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of Picasso's sculpture.¹ Like many of you, I am sure, I was impressed by the selection the curators assembled (many lent by the Musée Picasso) and the remarkably spacious display that enabled visitors to examine the objects so thoroughly. These virtues of the exhibition were facilitated by the curator's choice to include only sculpture (except for a few of Picasso's drawings and prints, and related photographs by Brassai). Yet, this exclusivity also seemed to me to present a serious problem—how can viewers understand Picasso's sculpture when it is cut off from its origin in Picasso's eclectic, multimedia process? I am very happy to see that current exhibition organized by the Musée Picasso integrates the media. The proposals for the monument pose a particular challenge to media-based definitions of his art—not only regarding sculpture, but, indeed, the visual arts as distinct from literature. And it seems to me that the issues raised by the project are becoming increasingly important as we gain new viewpoints on Picasso's career. Perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of the Apollinaire project is that it was a failure. Failure is not a result we expect when studying Picasso. Yet, it is this failure that opens Picasso to examination in ways that significantly shift both the questions we ask about his work and the ways we understand him in relation to both his culture and issues of our time.

CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

I would like to address the two issues that I believe make the Apollinaire monument especially relevant now :the nature of the commission, and art historians' reception of Picasso's specific proposals for the sculpture. Apollinaire had died in November 1918 and plans to erect a monument on his tomb in Père Lachaise (*fig. 1*) were announced in 1920, sponsored by a committee composed of twenty-eight members, including Picasso and Apollinaire's widow, Jacqueline. Since one of the themes of this paper is collaboration, I would like to acknowledge the help of a few of the people who made my work possible. One of the most crucial was a reference librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (unfortunately, I never knew his name). He told me I might find the personal papers of André Billy (the most dogged member of the committee) at the Municipal Library in Fontainebleau. There, the staff gave me the run of the attic, where Billy's papers were stored. I spent many days sorting through his files amidst an eclectic assemblage of objects—most memorably an Egyptian sarcophagus. Without knowing the location of Billy's papers and the many clippings he had saved, I pro ts to artists, including Jacob Epstein's *Tomb of Oscar Wilde* (1912) and José de Charmoy's *Cenotaph to Charles Baudelaire* (1902). But Picasso rarely accepted commissions. Here, he was called upon to design a monument that would accommodate the ideas of the group—a position that contradicted the creative autonomy that Picasso treasured. Moreover, he needed to look beyond his personal experience with Apollinaire to engage public conceptions of Apollinaire's achievement.

And this was no easy matter. The problems came into focus in 1924. Like so much about the project, the relevance of this date is both practical and aesthetic. On the practical side, an auction raised enough money to seriously contemplate fabricating and installing a monument. On the aesthetic side, acrimonious arguments erupted in cultural journals over who Apollinaire really was.

It became clear that there were many Apollinaires in contemporary culture—and some of them were profoundly opposed. To name only a few of his avatars in 1924—was Apollinaire best remembered as the prewar avant-gardist of *Le Poète assassiné* (1916), the patriot of *L'Esprit nouveau et les poètes* (1918), or the creator of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (1917), for which he invented the term “surréaliste?”

Apollinaire had encompassed these and many other positions, smoothing over contradictions with his energy and eagerness for change, yet his openness did not survive his death and the postwar era. Primarily chosen from Apollinaire’s friends in the prewar literary world, the committee members had little sympathy for younger writers and even less interest in their counterparts in the visual arts. Significantly, the committee did not include André Breton or any of the Surrealists. Among the few artists were :André Derain, Maurice Vlaminck, and Serge Férat (who ultimately designed the stele that stands above Apollinaire’s tomb).

So when Breton claimed both Apollinaire’s word “surréalisme” and his mantle, the committee members fought back in the press to uphold their view of Apollinaire as an emblem of stability and postwar reconstruc-

tion. Here is one example of the conflict—published in Le Corbusier’s journal, *L'Esprit nouveau* (fig. 2).

Given this situation, it would seem obvious that Picasso’s first proposal for the monument had no hope of acceptance by the committee. This was the Cannes sketchbook of drawings related to the sculpture called *Metamorphosis*, which he showed to the committee in early November 1927.² One member described them as “bizarre, monstrous ... a sort of unidentifiable lump that looks as though it’s got sexual organs sticking out of it.”³ As a reflection of Apollinaire, these drawings match the polysexuality and anarchy of the play, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*—so beloved by the young Surrealists.

What seems to me interesting—and increasingly so—is not that the committee and Picasso disagreed—that was predestined by the composition of the group. But that each was responding to a conception of Apollinaire’s legacy that was defined by the culture of the 1920s. This was a second, vital, level of contingency in the project. It is easy to conclude that Picasso maintained his creative independence by refusing to give the committee the realist bust they desired. Yet, was he truly independent? As the committee members sought to defend Apollinaire from association with Surrealism, Picasso sought to promote that conception of Apollinaire’s legacy. His proposals—the drawings related to *Metamorphosis*,⁴ and his second, the wire constructions (fig. 3)—placed Apollinaire in the corner of Surrealism.

In doing this, Picasso also defined his own current reputation. Again, we can refer to the magazines to map the controversy over the ballet *Mercur*e, for

example—whether Picasso had become irrelevant to contemporary art, or—as the Surrealists asserted—he was the “eternal personification of youth.”⁵ Given the association of the wire constructions with the “la profonde statue en rien” in *Le Poète assassiné*, it is worth noting that the Surrealists greatly admired Apollinaire’s vision of the monument made by the Bird of Bénin (an alter-ego of Picasso). In 1927, Roger Vitrac wrote of “the famous and illusory statue out of nothing in *Le Poète assassiné*.”⁶

These issues of collaboration and the contingency of public reputation led me to study Picasso’s relationship with dealers and curators, and then to examine how artists in our time have defined his legacy.

RESPONSES TO THE SCULPTURE

Now, I turn from the cultural context of the project to Picasso’s specific proposals for the monument and more narrowly art-historical issues. Given the time, I will focus on the wire constructions.⁷

An issue that links my two topics is collaboration—Picasso’s with the committee, and—on a more intimate level—Picasso’s partnership with Julio González in making the sculptures that Picasso intended to be maquettes for the monument. The extant correspondence between Picasso and González does little more than document their regular working sessions during 1928–32. Probably, we will never know to what extent González contributed to the transformation of Picasso’s rough sketches into subtly crafted sculptures.

Clearly, Picasso’s sketch; sketch at the upper right) is far from a blueprint for the finished sculpture. Questions of size, scale, articulation of parts, precise details

(such as the hands) and the gage of the wire were resolved in the process of cutting and joining the structure. Presumably, González’s skill was invaluable.

As we increasingly turn our attention to Picasso’s sculpture of the 1950s and ’60s, his reliance on partners to realize large sculptures makes Picasso’s history of collaboration all the more important. And the monument is defining.

In this part of my presentation, however, I am primarily concerned with how art historians have received the wire constructions. Picasso and González made these sculptures in the fall of 1928. At the annual gathering of Apollinaire’s friends at his tomb on November 10, Picasso reported that the maquette was ready. And on November 27, the Parisian newspaper *L’Intransigeant* published an interview with Picasso, conducted by the art critic Tériade, in which Picasso described the wire constructions as models for the monument to Apollinaire. In the early 1970s, Picasso told William Rubin that he intended to enlarge one of the four wire constructions to a height of approximately four meters, a size that would have prevented its transparent structure from being dominated by the surrounding, massive monuments in Père Lachaise and would have filled the field of vision of anyone standing near the sculpture with its interplay of solid and void.⁸

So, in November 1928 Picasso announced publicly that he intended the wire constructions to be maquettes for the monument. Given that *L’Intransigeant* was widely read in the art world and Tériade was a prominent critic, we can assume that Picasso’s identification of the sculptures with the monument

quickly became common knowledge.

Yet, within a few years, that association had vanished. The sculptures were stripped of their association with Apollinaire. They became known as “constructions in iron wire” or simply “sculptures.”⁹

What happened to their identification with the monument to Apollinaire? One explanation is that the project failed. By 1935, it was obvious that Picasso and committee would not agree on a monument.¹⁰ Of course, one can heroicize Picasso for resisting the conventional demands of the committee, but, still, it was a failure. So, why not bury it?

In passing, I note that Picasso and González completed one further version of a monument to Apollinaire, *The Woman in the Garden* (1929–30), followed by a replica in bronze. In my view, this sculpture is separate from the commission. While it shares formal and conceptual issues of the previous two proposals, I do not believe that Picasso intended it to stand on Apollinaire’s tomb. As he constructed the sculpture, Picasso must have known that this most radical of his designs had no chance of being accepted by the committee. Moreover, its small-scale, heterogeneous structure would have been overwhelmed among the mausolea of Père Lachaise. This was Picasso’s personal commemoration of his dear friend, one perfectly suited to installation on his private property, rather than a public site. What interests me are the formalist readings of the wire constructions that emerged. In critical discussions, the sculptures became isolated from their context in Picasso’s work. Their obvious relationship to the paintings he made at Dinard in the summer of 1928 was not

explored. Even though comparison identifies that the wire constructions derive from figures reaching toward bathing cabanas or tossing balls in the air.¹¹

In this context, Kahnweiler’s characterization in 1948 of the sculptures as “drawings in space” is particularly significant. His phrase is powerfully evocative, and it highlights the spatial play that is one of the sculptures’ primary contributions to twentieth century art. Yet, it is also oddly deracinating.

By focusing on linear form, Kahnweiler ignored subject matter—the sculptures were treated as if they were abstract (certainly an important issue in the 1940s). And the emphasis on drawing ignored the crucial process of transforming Picasso’s rough sketches into finely realized, three-dimensional assemblages of metal rods. This focus on ethereal abstraction completely negates Picasso’s goal of placing one of these sculptures on Apollinaire’s tomb in Père Lachaise. And this disconnection from Apollinaire is all the more unfortunate because Picasso’s incorporation of space is so closely associated with the monument in *Le Poète assassiné*.

It seems to me that we are confronting two biases : a preference for abstraction, and another purifying idea : a belief that the visual arts should be independent of literature. Art should not illustrate literature, or be too clearly inspired by it. I do not mean to place responsibility on Kahnweiler. These are common themes of the mid- and later twentieth century.

In his 1959 biography, Roland Penrose resurrected the project for a monument to Apollinaire with a paragraph summarizing its sad history.¹² As far as I know, Werner Spies was the first to truly revive the subject of the monument, when in 1971, he published in the *Frank-*

furter Allgemeine Zeitung the results of his recent interview with Picasso.¹³ Although not widely known at the time, Spies's article was extremely important because it not only described the wire constructions as proposals for the Apollinaire monument but also quoted Picasso as associating them with *Le Poète assassiné*.

Picasso demonstrated his determination to have the wire constructions realized on a monumental scale when he proposed one to the city of Chicago in the mid 1960s. This idea suggests that Picasso believed these sculptures from the late 1920s were the foundation for his involvement with publicly sited sculptures—just as his collaboration with Gonzàles was a precedent for his partnerships with Lionel Prejger and Carl Nesjar, among others. In Chicago, however, the commemoration of Apollinaire would have been lost. Oddly enough, an art historian widely-associated with Greenbergian formalism in the late twentieth century, William Rubin, most assiduously pursued fulfilling Picasso's wish to erect a monumental version of a wire construction as a monument to Apollinaire and to restore its literary inspiration. Using an intermediate-sized version supplied by Picasso, Rubin fabricated a 4-meter-high sculpture in Corten steel for the garden of the Museum of Modern Art in 1972 (*fig. 5*).¹⁴ It was through Bill's enthusiasm for understanding both the commission and Picasso's proposals that I became involved in the topic.

As many of you know, in the mid-1980s, another wire construction (also identified as a monument to Apollinaire) was enlarged and placed in the garden of the Musée Picasso. Happily, it recently returned.

I would like to close with another thanks. In the

early 1980s, when I first visited the collection of what became the Musée Picasso, the objects and staff were housed in cramped storerooms of the Musée Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Even though there was no space for visiting scholars, the director, Michele Richet, and young curator, Hélène Seckel (now Klein), welcomed me. Indeed, Madame Richet made an extraordinary gesture. She offered to lend me her personal copy of Spies's catalogue raisonné of Picasso's sculpture—a precious book.

I am very glad to see that this spirit of generous collaboration has returned to this museum we admire so much.



Tomb of Guillaume Apollinaire, Père Lachaise, Paris
© Photograph courtesy of Michael FitzGerald



PABLO PICASSO
Figure, fall 1928
Iron wire and sheet metal, 50.5 x 18.5 x 40.8 cm
Musée National Picasso, Paris. Dation Pablo Picasso. MP264
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L'Esprit nouveau, Paris, 1924



PABLO PICASSO
Monument, New York, 1972
Cor-Ten steel (395.3 x 149.2 x 319.3 cm, including base)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
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NOTES

1. The background of this paper is my dissertation, “Pablo Picasso’s Monument to Guillaume Apollinaire :Surrealism and Monumental Sculpture in France, 1918–59,” Columbia University, 1987. See also Peter Read’s fine account of this history, *Picasso & Apollinaire :The Persistence of Memory* (Berkeley, CA :University of California Press, 2008).
2. Sketchbook no. 15, Musée Picasso, Paris.
3. Paul Léautaud’s account of André Billy’s summary of the meeting. Translation by Peter Read, *Picasso & Apollinaire*, p.160.
4. Spies 67 and 67A.
5. See Michael FitzGerald, *Making Modernism :Picasso and the Creation of the Market for Twentieth-Century Art* (New York :Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), chapter 4.
6. Roger Vitrac, Jacques Lipchitz (Paris : Gallimard, 1927), p.8.
7. Four versions of the wire constructions are documents; three survive :Spies 68, 69, and 71.
8. When I discussed the plans for MoMA’s enlargement of the maquette with William Rubin in the early 1980s, he told me that Picasso had told him that the size the artist specified for the MoMA version (by drawing a mark on a wall) was approximately what he had intended for Apollinaire’s tomb.
9. For example, in MoMA’s exhibition of Picasso’s sculpture (curated by Roland Penrose), the sculptures are titled *Construction in Wire*, *The Sculpture of Picasso*, 1967.
10. In 1959, a separate commemoration of Apollinaire was inaugurated in the small park beside the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Although Picasso donated a sculpture (a bust of Dora Maar) for this purpose, this memorial should not be considered a continuation of Picasso’s project. Rather, it is a reflection of the project’s failure.
11. Compare the painting *Bathers on the Beach*, August 12, 1928 (Z.VII.216; Musée Picasso, Paris), with the wire construction (Spies 68) and the painting *Bathers with Beach Ball*, August 21, 1928 (Z.VII.226), with the wire construction (Spies 71).
12. Roland Penrose, *Picasso :His Life and Work* (New York :Harper and Brothers, 1959), p.206.
13. The article appeared in the issue of October 22, 1971.
14. The enlargement that Picasso oversaw in 1962 (Spies 68B; collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York) is based on Spies 68A, which is the only of the existing three versions of the wire constructions that Picasso chose to enlarge. Presumably it was his choice for the monument to Apollinaire. Like MoMA’s enlargement based on it, this intermediate version of the sculpture is a simplified version of the 1928 wire construction. Both enlargements (Spies 68B and C) lack many details of the original, which reflect the original’s informal construction and convey an intimacy of the handmade that is absent from the larger versions. Specific differences are the overlap of thick wire at the bottom of the large oval and the wrapping of thin, connecting wires around the thick elements of the framework, as well as many subtle variations in the shape of wires and the facial disk—all of which disrupt the strict symmetry of the enlargements. Picasso oversaw and approved these changes in the intermediate version, which give the sculpture an austere, “minimalist” character that may reflect trends in the art of the 1960s. He never saw MoMA’s enlargement.