INTRODUCTION

PICASSO SUCKS
The greatest Picasso exhibition ever held took place in 1980 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Between May 22 and September 16, some 1,021,000 visitors came to see 970 artworks. To MoMA’s own extensive holdings, which at the time included not only Les Demoiselles d’Avignon but Guernica, the exhibition added the treasures of the estate collection destined for the Musée Picasso in Paris, as well as hundreds of other national and international loans. By December 1980 the exhibition catalogue had sold 215,000 copies—more than any other MoMA publication, save for that other monument to midcentury humanism, Edward Steichen’s 1955 The Family of Man.¹

When the magazine Art in America dedicated a special issue to the retrospective, the editors, borrowing a phrase from André Malraux, asked various artists and commentators to “reevaluate their feelings about the ‘archwizard of modern art.’”² Among the respondents was the self-described “Genius of the Vulgar,” the artist Larry Rivers (figure 1):³
As I’m writing this I’m wearing a “Picasso Sucks” T-shirt. The name going across the upper chest is a large red reproduction of his signature with S-U-C-K-S in black, made to look painted later, going across this signature like a visual Bronx cheer. Is this shirt a hawker’s inadvertent grasp of Picasso’s subversive relationship to the whole of Western art? Is it the playfulness of Pop-gone-folk imposing itself on the way to a few bucks? The implications or cultural cross-references are boundless, and are heavy or light in relationship to the thinker, talker, writer.

Rivers’s T-shirt was a postmodernist exemplum. He had bought it, he said, ready-made. The apparent graffito was, in fact, a mass-produced simulation. The faux-demotic dissoning of the modern master (a “Bronx cheer” is what the British would call a raspberry) mimed tensions in the Picasso logo itself, between unique and multiple, personal touch and photomechanical replication. This was boilerplate culture-after-Warhol. The slang even queered the name of the macho genius.

Another contributor, Tony Shafrazi, recalled his actual defacement of a Picasso, ascribing a quasi-Oedipal significance to his having spray-painted the words “KILL LIES ALL” on Guernica in 1974. “You might say it was like reacting against the father almost—something like that. The problem I had set myself was this: how can you radically renew something that had an extraordinary power in its own time, but has
since lived off the myth that that power quite naturally generated as it passed into art history? That is to say, how can you take all that artistic power, strip it of the veneer of art-historical acceptance which so distorts its meaning, and make it stand in the present time? Ed Ruscha remarked, “On entering the museum, I was determined not to be overwhelmed by the force of this colossal art figure,” before passing one-word judgement on seven particular years in the oeuvre (“1958: Shameful”), and declaring the 1914 _Glass of Absinthe_, with its ready-made spoon, Picasso’s “greatest work”—“Who would argue?”

Joseph Kosuth was categorical: Picasso incarnated “modernism itself.” At this point in history, Picassian modernism could be taken only as “a negative model—as a kind of warning”:

We’ve seen with Picasso, first, and perhaps more than with anyone else, what can happen to the meaning of an artist’s work through the glorification and mystification of the artist himself. Picasso became more than institutionalized, he became deified as the modernist superhero. For many, my criticism here of Picasso will be experienced as a kind of sacrilege. Such a resistance to any form of criticism is worrisome because it suggests the lack of a real discourse, which is precisely the problem with institutionalized modernism [. . .]. In the case of Picasso, the lack of a real critical discourse in relation to the work suggests that [. . .] in fact, one is only confronting _authority._

William Rubin’s installation had indeed conflated MoMA with Picasso’s oeuvre, filling the museum with a chronological, monographic representation—the “ultimate blockbuster,” in Roberta Smith’s words. (Rubin himself, in conversation with Smith, was conscious that a certain “aura of evil” attended the show’s magnitude.) For Kosuth, surpassing institutional modernism required Picasso’s “papal presence” to be overcome.

The _Art in America_ special issue gestured in places at the critical discourse for which Kosuth called. Donald Kuspit found at MoMA the “paradoxical revelation” of Picasso’s “pseudo-expressivity”: “Picasso’s fullness is illusory—his is a generativity that masks a lack of any essential reason for creativity.” The artist’s genius was mere performance because he lacked a creative essence. It was not that genius was a false doctrine—it was that Picasso was a false genius. Worse, he was a sick soul, suffering from “incurable monomania,” in league with “death-forces.” Intimations of mental pathology—alongside the suspicion of inauthenticity—have been chronic in Picasso criticism, from Carl Jung to Rosalind Krauss. Elsewhere in the magazine, Kuspit saw Richard Hamilton’s recent appropriations of Picasso’s image as so many ironic uncrowning: the “modern artist hero” shown up as a mass-mediated “king of hype”; the once-great innovator reduced to the “static and deified” celebrity enthroned in Hamilton’s work, _Picasso au chateau_.

In an article entitled “Re-Presenting Picasso,” Rosalind Krauss rejected the “expressionist view” that presumed the fundamentally biographical character—qua “private
life”—of the oeuvre. As an alternative model for unifying the production, she cited Leo Steinberg on Picasso’s drive to possess a totality of “aspects.” Yet the latter drive was doomed to failure or “dispossession”—a negativity Krauss discerned in the post-cubist “recourse to paraphrase,” which worked in this reading to unground the authorial self-as-origin. The crucial moment, however, was cubist collage, which had recast “the visual as language,” displacing depiction’s traditional claim to presence with “representation.” While versions of this claim would recur in Krauss’s writings throughout the 1980s and 1990s, here she invoked Jacques Derrida’s rewriting of writing as the supplement of speech, in undecidable relation to the opposition between presence and absence. The pasted papers “supplemented and supplanted” the support’s ground, even as their elements undid formalism’s binaries, signifying both “line and colour, closure and openness, planarity and recession.” As well as confirming her role as a conduit for poststructuralism in Anglophone criticism, Krauss’s essay suggested that Picasso’s work might deconstruct the reception from within.

There were nods in Art in America toward Marxian precursors in Picasso critique, such as Max Raphael, whose pioneering 1933 essay on the artist declared that Marxism had made “a clean sweep of all the class-conditioned illusions of consciousness which bourgeois scholars entertain, such as the absolute individualism of genius, the absolute independence or autonomy of the mind, and the immanent character of art history.” For her part, Krauss pointed to John Berger’s The Success and Failure of Picasso (1965) as the “first step” in the “Picasso revision.” Berger’s study—which he dedicated to Max Raphael—had argued that Picasso’s failure consisted in his success. By the 1960s the latter had “little to do with his work”:

> It is the result of the idea of genius which he provokes. This is acceptable because it is familiar, because it belongs to the early nineteenth century, to Romanticism, and to the revolutions which, safely over, are now universally admired. The image of his genius is wild, iconoclastic, extreme, insatiable, free. In this respect he is comparable with Berlioz or Garibaldi or Victor Hugo. In the guise of such genius he has already appeared in hundreds of books and stories for a century or more.

Picasso’s interwar reversion to magic or primitivism was an anachronistic error, a falling away from the urgent, dialectical actuality of cubism. The “great exception” of cubism apart, Picasso’s “fundamental difficulty” was the outmodedness of his nineteenth-century style of agency. Berger did not dispense with the concept of genius. Picasso was simply the wrong kind, for “the typical genius of the twentieth century, whether you think of Lenin or Brecht or Bartok, is a very different kind of man. He needs to be almost anonymous: he is quiet, consistent, controlled, and very conscious of the power of the forces outside himself.” Had Berger chosen Marcel Duchamp as his exemplary almost-anonymous twentieth-century genius, he would have chimed with a rising chorus of opinion in postmodern America.
In the service of a photographic postmodernism—a “new,” “radicalized,” positive “perversion” of modernism—Douglas Crimp denounced the MoMA retrospective for affirming the conventions of genius:

Modern art could now be understood as art had seemingly always been understood, as embodied in the masterpieces invented by the master artist: Picasso—the man’s signature adorned the T-shirts of thousands on the streets of New York that summer, evidence, one supposes, that they had attended the spectacle and were proud to have thus paid homage to a man of genius. [...] The myths, the clichés, the platitudes, the idées reçues about artistic genius—appropriately signified by this signature—were never so resoundingly reaffirmed, not only by the mass media, from whom it was to have been expected, but by the museum itself, by curators, dealers, critics, and by artists.25

The retrospective had reanimated a regressive, masculinist image of artistic identity, cognate with the “Author-God” whose death Roland Barthes first proclaimed in 1967:26

It is, then, as if Duchamp’s readymades had never been conceived, as if modernism’s most radical developments, including Picasso’s own cubist collage, had never taken place, or at least as if their implications could be overlooked and the old myths of art fully revivified. The dead author has been reborn; he has returned with his full subjective power restored.27

This was Picasso as anti-Duchamp, with the MoMA show the obverse of Duchamp’s decisive 1963 Pasadena retrospective, a colossal disavowal of the fact that Duchamp had “replaced Picasso as the early-twentieth-century artist most relevant to contemporary practice.”28

A model of art history in which Duchamp trumped Picasso had its limitations. To adopt Mira Schor’s memorable locution, one “mega-father” came to supersede another.29 Modern conventions of hero worship and canon formation proved adaptable to authors who subverted the institutions of authorship.30 Nevertheless, the 1980 MoMA retrospective had become a token in the culture wars between a nominally antihumanist “postmodernism of resistance” and a neoconservative “postmodernism of reaction.”31 In the retrospective’s wake, in an issue of the journal October dedicated to what it termed “Art World Follies,” Benjamin Buchloh drew a parallel between contemporary neotraditionalism and the so-called Call to Order—the traditionalist turn by which modernism compensated for the 1914–18 war—at the level of the “intricate connection between aesthetic mastery and authoritarian domination.” Having restored painting after cubism, Picasso personified an “atavistic notion of the master artist,” an effectively protofascist personality type.32

In the same number Rosalind Krauss reworked her treatment of collage as a special case. She called her text “In the Name of Picasso”: Picasso as father again, God-the-Father, Author-God. The MoMA show had encouraged a biographical hermeneutic
that sought to uncover proper names behind the works ("Olga," "Marie-Thérèse," "Casagemas"). This "aesthetics of autobiography" rested on a naive view of iconic meaning as transparent reference to this or that person or object in the real world.  

It was as though “the shifting, changing sands of visual polysemy, of multiple meanings and regroupings, have made us intolerably nervous, so that we wish to find the bed-rock of sense.” Such biographism was ironic given collage’s achievement in decentering the referent in favor of something like the linguistic sign. From Krauss’s vantage, “on the threshold of a postmodernist art,” cubist collage appeared as a “proto-history” of the “postmodernist notion of the originless play of the signifier.” Against the reactionary personality cult, collage prefigured the postmodernism of resistance.

Ultimately, the problem was that for post-1960s artists and critics, Picasso stood for a mode of heroic, individual, masculine authorship that was no longer tenable. The polemics around the MoMA show set the terms of Picasso criticism for a generation, not least because they rehearsed the antitheses of broader debates around postmodernism, which by the 1990s came to ossify in the opposition between Duchamp as the “anti-author par excellence,” versus Picasso as the representative of a “traditionalist humanist aesthetic.”

Despite its suspicion of grand narratives, in its post-ness postmodernism extended a dialectical, linear model of history that was implicitly avant-gardist, and obviously Western in focus. In this story Picasso had a pivotal function, if only as the figure of a modernism to be superseded. As postmodernism gave way to the global “contemporary,” Picasso’s critical relevance dwindled away, even as the market value of his work increased. During the same period, concurrent with the expansion of a neoliberal ideology that annexed “artistic critique” to the symbolic repertoire of economic management, the neoconservative construction of Picasso consolidated its hold on the artist’s reception.

**ANNUS MIRABILIS**

In 2018 the London Tate Modern staged yet another Picasso blockbuster. This time the focus was a single year: 1932. To glorify what they claimed to be this “exceptionally fertile” year in Picasso’s career, the curators lifted a term from the most recent volume of Sir John Richardson’s celebrated *Life of the artist: annus mirabilis, “year of wonders.”* So doing, they bound the show’s meaning with a curious knot, braided from the poetics of sovereignty. By appealing to the authority of *A Life of Picasso*, Tate enlisted a text whose “services to Art” had caused the constitutional monarch Queen Elizabeth II to appoint its author Knight Commander of the British Empire. But in its own way the phrase *annus mirabilis* bore the historical impress of absolute monarchy. The original “Annus Mirabilis,” commemorated by John Dryden in his poem of that title, was the disastrous year—war taxed, plague infested, fire wrecked—of 1666. The political function of Dryden’s 304 quatrains was to glorify King Charles II’s management of the Second Dutch War on the one hand, and on the other the Great Fire of