

Visual and Literary Materiality in Modern Art

Typographic experimentation in early twentieth-century modern art partakes of two independent and very differently structured disciplines: the visual arts and literature. The conceptual underpinnings of these two domains throughout the period from the turn of the century through to the mid 1920s, in which typographic experimentation flourished so conspicuously, need to be established if the practice of typography is to be understood. Within the mainstream of what is known as the avant-garde in this period—Futurism, Dada, Cubism, Vorticism—typographic experiment was uniquely suited to express the cross-disciplinary approach to representation which formed one of the central tenets of much artistic practice. In this burgeoning of cross-disciplinary, sometimes synaesthetic, activity typography participated in the investigation of both visuality and literariness and in the characteristics attributed to both the *imago* and *logos* as representational modes. An assertion of the self-sufficiency of both visual arts and literature as nonreferential, replete, and autonomous was dependent on the concept of materiality: the relations between form and expression, between matter and content, were assumed to depend largely on the capacity of the image, the poem, the word, or the mark to *be*, to exist in its own right on an equal stature with the tangible, dimensional objects of the real world.

This insistence on the ontological status of what had been considered representation as equivalent to the status of real being was theorized in the work of a number of artists and writers within the various groups and circles of avant-garde activity. The aims of these are as varied as the locations and dispositions of their authors. The concept of materiality which surfaces in the 1912 essay by Kandinsky, "Concerning the Spiritual in Art," is at variance with that proposed by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger in Paris or Filippo Marinetti in Milan in 1912 as well. There is no homogeneous synthesis available from these dispersed and disparate positions. But there is a single common central theme of attention to materiality as the basis of autonomous, self-sufficient repleteness so that artistic forms are considered to *be* and not to *represent*. The concept of being, in terms of an artistic object, generally depended upon a belief in the inherent characteristics of the material means of its production, but the semiotic notion of differential meaning can be located within the theoretical discussions as well, though in less clearly articulated terms.

The Legacy of Mallarmé

The aesthetic legacy of Symbolism played an important part in the development of early twentieth-century art, and this is nowhere more true than in the influence of the prominent Symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé. *A Throw of the Dice* stands as the single most striking precedent for avant-garde experiment with the visual form of poetic language. The radical work was first given a published typographic treatment approximating Mallarmé's original sketches in 1914. The enigmatic text of the poem, rendered doubly complex by the graphic, spatial, visual inscription, remains a touchstone of both historical and aesthetic reference for all subsequent twentieth-century typographic experimental poetry. While the poets to be discussed in depth in the next chapter were less concerned with the metaphysics of the *book*, which was central to Mallarmé's project, and more interested in the politics of poetic and graphic form, all of them had aesthetic links to the Symbolist tradition, even if only as that mode from which they sought to distance themselves. Marinetti, Apollinaire, and Zdanevich, in particular, were aware of Mallarmé's as the prominent voice of the preceding generation, and they almost universally owed key features of their own aesthetic practice to his theoretical vocabulary.¹ Not surprisingly, the aesthetic premises of

their approach to materiality are closer in sensibility to that of the Symbolist poet than are those of Tzara. Marinetti and Zdanevich, in particular, stayed within an intellectual tradition in which the synaesthetic properties of material form were considered fundamental to poetic practice.

The late work of Stéphane Mallarmé can be considered the demarcating point from which modernity, as a radical rethinking of representational strategy within the field of poetics, comes into being and comes before a literary audience, especially within the francophone poetics of much of Western Europe and Russia.² Many aspects of Mallarmé's work bear directly upon the creation of later avant-garde experiments in typography in spite of the marked distinctions between his aesthetic intentions and those of the early twentieth-century writers whose work will be the focus here.

First, and most literally, there is the bold fact of his having made use of the possibility of visually scoring the poetic page by the use of different sizes and fonts of typographic letterforms. Mallarmé's work in this regard is unique and without precedent within literature. The literary form in which visual play with typographic arrangement existed prior to the sketched out plan for *A Throw of the Dice* was the pattern poem.³ The reductive iconicity of these works, with their limited pictorial imagery and generally popular or religious tone, was a far cry from the abstract metaphysics of Mallarmé's work—as indeed were the display techniques of advertising typography which may have provided the visual inspiration for the hierarchization of the text in *A Throw of the Dice*.⁴

Second, Mallarmé clearly distinguished his poetic practice from the quotidian forms of language in use in the mass media of the press, as did other Symbolists, namely, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud. Literariness as such began to gain its definition in this period more through its distinction from pedestrian usage than through prescriptive literary formulas. Differentiation and negation, a sense that poetry was in part defined by a contrast with what it was not: this harbinger the typically modern definition of artistic practices as self-consciously situated within cultural contexts where they gain their identity through contrast. Such a definition marks out the activity of resistance as a fundamental task for aesthetics. Here the avant-garde evidences clear dependence upon the bourgeois culture against which it is defined, functioning as the protected arena for discourse otherwise lost within the emerging culture of industrial capitalism. Mallarmé's disdain for journalistic writing, combined with his ambivalence about the success of newspaper as a popular

form, embodies the strategic paradox of the avant-garde whose elitist aesthetics alienated them from the very masses to and for whom they wished to write.

Third, Mallarmé clearly dissolved and subverted the enunciation of the individual subject, which had been central to romanticism, thus rendering problematic the relation between individual authorship and subjectivity.⁵

Many aspects of the poetic activity of the later avant-garde were not represented in Mallarmé's work, most particularly the political, anti-classical and antihistorical tactics of such writers as Wyndham Lewis and Tristan Tzara, whose aims in the 1910s could not have been further from the idealist metaphysics of the Symbolist poet. But Mallarmé's work laid the foundation for the orchestral verse of the Russian poet Ilia Zdanevich, for the antisubjective work of Marinetti, and for some (limited) aspects of the figurative presentations in Apollinaire's work. Other aspects of the symbolist aesthetic, especially notions of synaesthesia and correspondence, had a transformed legacy in the distinctly different treatments of the Russian and Italian Futurists.

The spatial and visual manipulation of the poetic text desired by Mallarmé in *A Throw of the Dice* embodies a curious paradox.⁶ On the one hand this poem, the most hermetic of Mallarmé's works, was the expression of his desire to "... break away completely from the phenomenal world and toward a poetry of absolute purity."⁷ But on the other hand, in the process of bringing forth an idea in form in order to render it perceptible, Mallarmé invested in a highly material practice. He manipulated the typographic form, paying close attention to its visual features, spatial distribution, and capacity to organize the text into a hierarchized figural order. Antimaterial though he may have been in his intentions, his means, in this work, suggest the possibilities for a materially investigative practice.

The typographic features of this work can be readily enumerated, though the interpretation of their effects remains resistant to any closure. This is, in part, due to the complexity added to the work by the manipulation of material means and, in part, owing to the already fully abstract character of Mallarmé's language. In fact, Mallarmé chose to use only one typeface, Didot, a classic and simple face without undue decoration in the serifs, or extreme thick/thin variations, or oblique angling of the counters (open spaces in letters like "a") or extreme descenders or ascenders (on "p" or "d"). The typeface, then, was relatively neutral—unlike the more fussy appearance of the Elzevir face which had been used for the first publication of the work—and Mallarmé em-

ployed it in both roman and italic and in a range of sizes. In spite of his stated love of poster art, he restrained his choices, keeping to one typeface and to text sizes, rather than those large letters used for display.

Mallarmé employs the type to separate the text into several registers, to link elements of the work throughout the entire sequence, across pages, gutters, and spaces, and to make figures or ideogrammatic constellations of words upon the page. In the process, he allows the roman face to take advantage of its more strictly vertical form as visually stable and the italic to use its forward slant for dynamic contrast. The separation of registers begins immediately, in the first lines of the poem, which also serve as its title. The words "A throw of the dice" ("Un coup de dés") stand alone on the first recto page. The next turning or opening (the double-page spread in a book is known as an "opening" and includes the verso on the left and a recto side on the right) only contains type on the right page (figure 1). This text begins with "never" ("jamais") in the same point size as that of the opening words. This opening phrase is picked up in the fourth and eighth openings, to be completed by the words "will abolish" and "chance" (figure 2). By visually linking these elements Mallarmé stretches the sentence across other textual passages, keeping the syntactic closure suspended. The visual clue allows the phrase to be read intact, but only in relation to the rest of the poem, which serves as a field of other figurative elements while also providing a context for this phrase. While poetry regularly makes use of recurrent themes, suspended and fragmented elements which reconnect in associative processes, one of Mallarmé's unique contributions is this visual marking of themes to force the connections.

As the smaller size of roman letters proceeds, the axis of each page develops as the center of a sequence of dynamics. The words move forward and downward on the page, following conventional reading patterns, but they do so with the effect of creating a central axis on which they balance or hang, also suspended. This is an effect of graphic design, as well as a tool, and the layout mockups for even the most banal of commercial printers always attended to the various axes established through the visual centerpoint, or balance line, of lines of type (figure 3). With the advent of highly coded rules for asymmetrical typography in the 1920s, this sensibility would be subject to serious discipline. In the 1890s there was more tolerance for the combination of centered and off-center blocks of type within a single document, and the tensions which arise from having multiple axes of balance in a piece are made use of in Mallarmé's arrangements. One of the effects of this is to provide a spatial illusion, as if the elements of language achieved their relative size on the

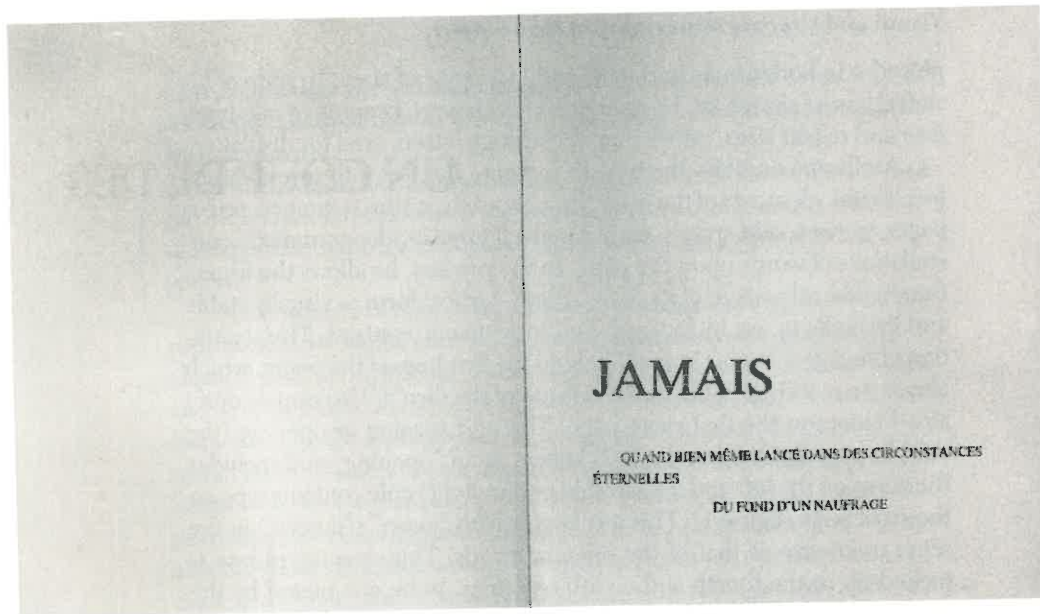


Figure 1. Page opening from Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés* (Paris: 1914); the 1914 edition in accord with Mallarmé's notes.

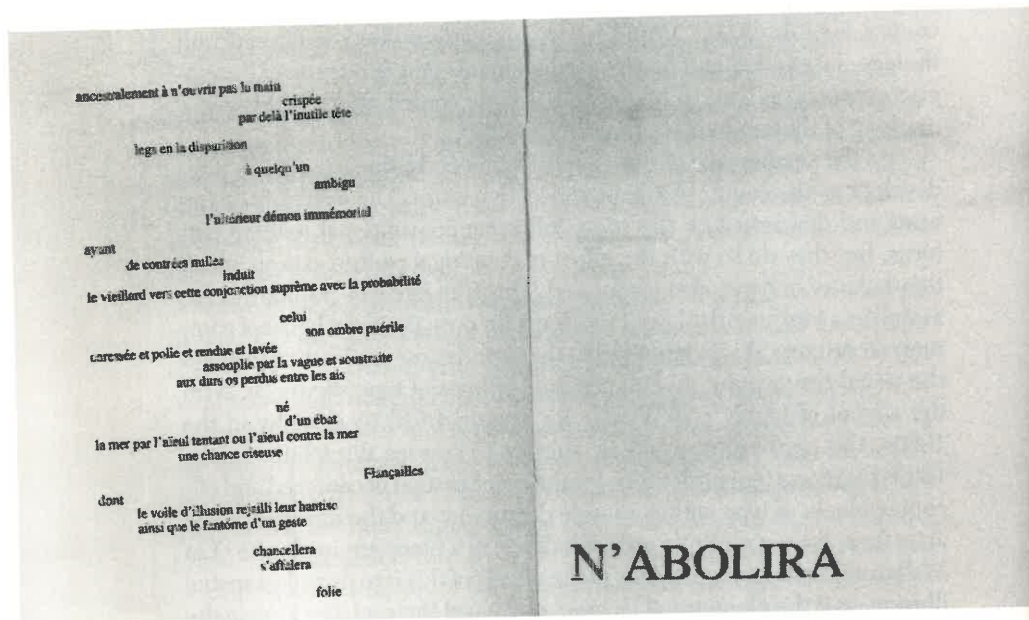


Figure 2. Page opening from *Un Coup de dés* showing the continuation of sentence from second page opening. (Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de dés*, Paris: 1914)

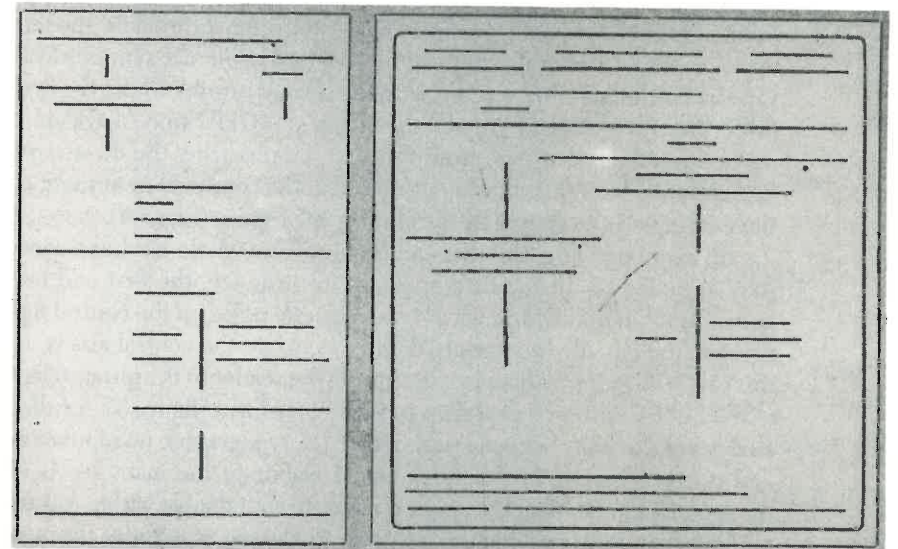


Figure 3. Pages from a journal produced for the advertising and commercial printing trades showing various "axes" according to which pages may be structured.

page by a contrast of real, physical weight and the optical effect of distance. As in the case of a stellar constellation, the appearance of the words as figures on a flat plane seems to be the result of their having been schematicized on a single picture plane, rather than of their actually existing in the same spatial plane. Thus the changes in size create an illusionistic space as well as a graphic and abstract *espace* within the white blankness of the page.

Insofar as figures are created in Mallarmé's poem, they are abstract and dynamic, registering the movement of the listing ship and the scintillating vibration of stars, rather than charting any literal course through seas or heavens or providing any iconic point of reference for the text. Mallarmé's concept of the figure is itself already so abstract that his engagement with the manipulation of material to figurative ends increases that antimimetic ordering. It is in part for this reason that the work is so resistant to interpretive closure. The "figures" refuse to be read in terms which might reduce them to an equivalent either named or sketched. The textual elements forge links of meaning in their visual and verbal relations but those relations function as their own gestalt, not as the trace or image of some other figurative form.

Mallarmé manipulates these typographic elements at every level. In one annotation of early proofs he requested a substitution for the letter “f” in a font where the top and bottom curls were not symmetrical. Line by line he adjusted spacing, as in the second turning where the first three lines, “SO BE IT / that / the Abyss” (“SOIT / que / l’Abyme”) make a rapid descent, one from the next, emphasizing the downward fall, and then have that movement slowed in the continual movement of the next eight lines simply by the closing up of space (figure 4).

In every opening, the shape of the lines as a whole has been carefully attended to. In the fifth opening, for instance, the first and last lines, “as if” in both cases, act as two magnetic poles on the central figure, pulling equally in opposite directions, while the central axis is, in this case, the gutter of the page, returning the reader to the physical fact of the book’s existence as well as to its literary form (figure 5). A fuller analysis of the links between page structure, typographic manipulation and poetic meaning in this work would elaborate the many levels of these connections.⁸ But the poem is no more containable within a close reading than is a constellation available to closure as a figure through approach—from a distance the stars present the gestalt of a figure. Moving closer one moves through them, aware that the visual bonds which forged the figurative image dissolve into illusion. The figurative aspect of Mallarmé’s work is similarly relational and dynamic, not fixed and closed.

Mallarmé’s inspiration for the visual appearance of *A Throw of the Dice* derived in part from his negative reaction to the habits of reading formed in response to the daily press, to the tedious patterns of verbal presentation. Criticizing the mechanization of reading induced by these journals, Mallarmé staked out another of the tenets so essential to the avant-garde: that poetic imagination had to be rescued from the dulling effects of ordinary graphic and linguistic practices:

Let us have no more of those successive, incessant, back and forth motions of our eyes, tracking from one line to the next and beginning all over again—otherwise we will miss that ecstasy in which we have become immortal for a brief hour, free of all reality, and raise our obsessions to the level of creation.⁹

This uncompromising criticism of the newspaper form was modified by Mallarmé’s enthusiasm for its potential to produce surprise effects when folded, making unexpected juxtapositions from the conventional spatial ordering by which its reading was normally bound. Mallarmé’s condemnation of the conventional book was no less severe:

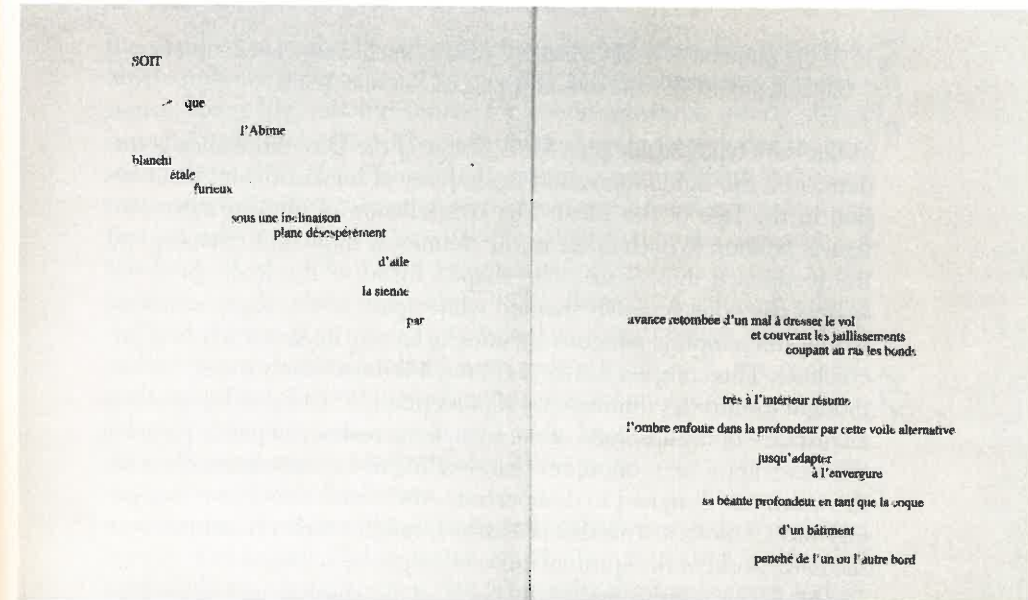


Figure 4. Page opening from *Un Coup de dés* showing both the use of spacing and the construction of axes of visual balance. (Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de dés*, Paris: 1914)

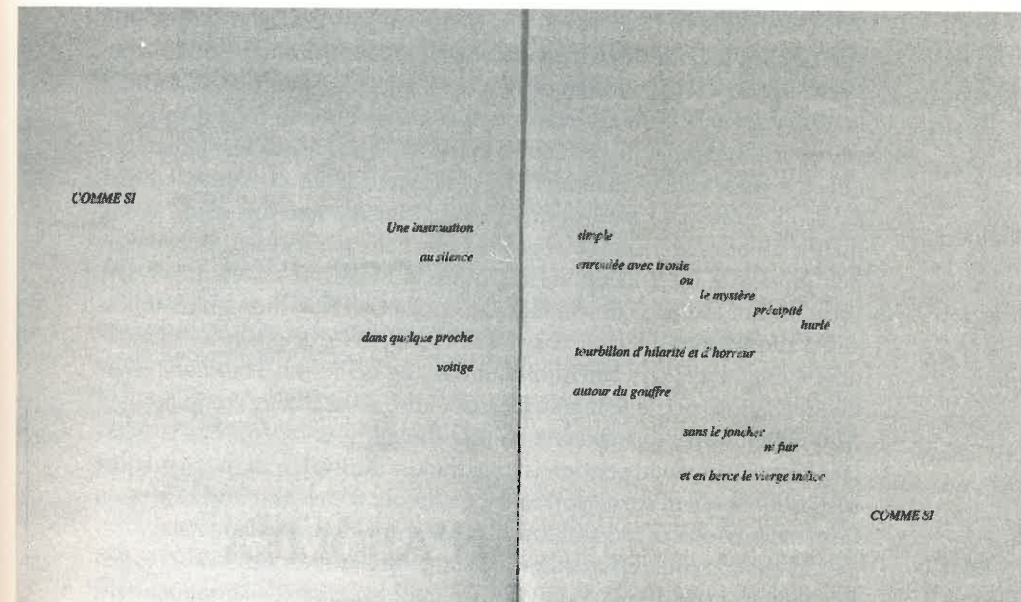


Figure 5. Page opening from *Un Coup de dés* with two identical phrases serving as linguistic and typographic poles of tension and balance on the page. (Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de dés*, Paris: 1914)

to the question of books which are read in the ordinary way I raise my knife in protest, like the cook chopping off chickens' heads . . .¹⁰

Mallarmé's typographic plan for *A Throw of the Dice* emphatically underscored the randomness and inadequacy of human thought and action in the face of the Ideal. The constellation of phrases move into figural relation to each other as the themes of shipwreck, chance, and transcendence interweave. The shaped forms of the lines stand out against the conspicuously marked white space of the page, activating spatial and temporal relations outside the normal linear sequence of poetic lines. This complex format, as Penny Florence neatly states, "moves thought toward the simultaneity of perception."¹¹ Designed as much as an instance of the absolute, of the Idea, to be realized in poetic form for refractive apprehension rather than reading in any conventional sense, this work was designed to demonstrate Mallarmé's conviction that poetry was a serious instrument of ascesis through which a transition from the daily world to the spiritual universe might be achieved.¹²

Mallarmé's dedication to the purity of the absolute and to the Idea bequeathed a legacy to the early twentieth-century avant-garde that was radically transformed, even among those Russian poets whose debt to Symbolism remained so conspicuous. While rejecting the metaphysics essential to Mallarmé, for instance, the poet and typographer Zdanevich kept the conviction that there was an Ideal, a beyond-reason and beyond-logic realm which was apprehendable through poetic experience. Poetry must, in Zdanevich's view, reject the habitual patterns of ordinary speech, embody essences that are emotional, sexual, and universal in nature, and be presented in a visual form which reinforced the effect of their verbal qualities. The concerns Zdanevich expressed thematically were of a different order altogether, as were the actual verbal means he employed in the construction of his *zaum* verse. But important aspects of the conceptual apparatus of Mallarmé's work are clearly present: not the least of which is the conviction that through an intensified attention to the material properties of poetic language a transcendence from logic and the quotidian may be achieved. There are other manifestations of the Symbolist legacy—the synaesthetic component of Marinetti's work, for instance, vulgar though it is by contrast to Mallarmé's metaphysical poetics, is nonetheless derived from the Symbolist aesthetic theory of correspondences, a theory which also depends upon investigation of and recognition of the material forms of language.

Marinetti took up another aspect of Mallarmé's work, also transforming it radically in both formal and conceptual ways—namely,

the repression of the lyrical subject which had been so essential to nineteenth-century poetics. The speaking author whose personal experience, inner life, was the source for poetic activity, is utterly absent from *A Throw of the Dice*. The metaphysical agenda precluded the personal; the realms of the absolute or the idea were without individual subjective inflection; they were beyond, outside, or so deeply interior to that subjective mode as to be without qualification by the experience of a mere poet whose humanity must necessarily pale in contrast to the enormity of the universal realm.¹³ The absence of a lyrical subject within *A Throw of the Dice* is a marked one, and though, again, both motivations and manifestations were radically different, the conspicuous repression of the individual author as site of enunciation, as subjective source for the poetic experience, would be an important element of the early avant-garde, Marinetti and Tzara in particular, whose precedents are evident in Mallarmé.

The final feature of Mallarmé's work which demands recognition here is the use of a figural, visual, mode. This figuration is a kind of bringing forth, an appearance, that is radically antigrammatical. It does not derive from syntax or the tropes of speech which normally form a figure or image within language, but rather from the effect of language arranged to make a form independent of the grammatical order of the words. This arrangement is reinforced in the spatial distribution of the words on the page, but also, against the expectations of normative linguistic order. This concept of figuration belongs properly to the *presentational* rather than to the *representational*—to that order of visual and verbal manifestation which claims to bring something into being in its making, rather than to serve to represent an already extant idea, form, thought, or thing. A direct link is established through this between Mallarmé's poetics and the critical position developed on this point by Apollinaire, whose rejection of the representational mode depended upon the figural as its very foundation. This figure was not conceived of as something formed outside of language and then represented by it, but as something formed against and in spite of syntax—original, linguistic and/or visual, and nonmediate. While this formation in language works, for Mallarmé, as a means of access to the Ideal, it has no pre-existing referent and is not contained within the signifying structures of ordinary language.

Apollinaire had very different uses for this figurative notion than what is achieved in Mallarmé's work, where the concept of the figure was the very symbol of Symbolism—that elusive, hermetic, and ungraspable image which rejected the easy closure of meaning or gestalt. But

the concept of figure as that which subverts and problematizes the structure of representation and its ontological basis is apparent in the constellation of phrases which constitute the complex form of *A Throw of the Dice*. That the work had its first typographically complex appearance in print in 1914 makes its relation to the historical avant-garde all the more clear. It was published and received in the context of an experimental avant-garde poetics for which Mallarmé's own theoretical poetics had provided the fundamental framework.

Materiality and Modernism: The General Problem

Any attempt to deal with "modern art" or "modern literature" as if the phrases designated any single or unified area of activity would fall immediately prey to just criticism: the study of materiality within modern art and literature can only be sustained on the basis of individual artists. But in spite of the above caveat against just such activity, a few generalities will be sketched in here with respect to the attitudes toward visual and literary materiality in modern art practices.

The critical writing and texts produced in the early twentieth century served any number of modern artists and writers to articulate a metacritical understanding of their activity. The modern period may be characterized as much by the appearance of this superabundance of metacritical texts as by the innovative forms of its artistic productions. These critical articulations offer considerable insight into contemporary attitudes toward the conceptual premises of visual arts and literature.

In the early twentieth century, practitioners of both visual arts and literature paid unprecedented attention to the specificity and formal properties of their media. In literature this meant there was an increase in self-conscious attention to the role of the letter, the sound, the word, the sentence, the phrase, the form—in short, all of those elements identifiable as belonging to literature and to nothing else. Likewise, in the visual arts, there were systematic investigations of color, line, form, mass, surface, plane, composition, and spatial illusion or lack thereof. This investigation was not merely a concern with pure formality of means. Instead, both the artistic work and the critical writing function as a metacritical investigation of the structure of visual and literary arts as signifying practices. Underlying the queries into the nature of visual or literary form was an interrogation of what constituted visuality and literariness in aesthetic and, later, social terms. In addition, these partic-

ipated in an investigation of the terms of signification, of assumptions about the nature of presence and absence, of image and word, *imago* and *logos*, as different orders of symbolic activity. The materiality of presence associated with visual form, which comes to be dogmatically codified by mid-century, was considerably modified within the early twentieth century, as was the equally dogmatic concept of an absent signified within the structure of the linguistic sign. The early twentieth century investigations of materiality in arts practices refused such reductive oppositions, and the proliferation of the hybrid form of typographic experiment is a testimonial to this stance.

On further examination it becomes evident that formal investigation of signification within early twentieth-century art frequently focused upon an inquiry into the effect of the material properties of the signifier in its relation to the signified. Most specifically, this signals a shift of emphasis from the plane of reference, meaning or content, which had previously dominated representational art, to conspicuous and general attention to the plane of discourse. This new emphasis allowed, encouraged, and depended upon a focus on materiality, though within each artist's individual practice these relations were differently construed.

To chart the role of materiality within modern art practice requires an initial mapping of certain historical and conceptual territory, and an accompanying suggestion of alignments and similarities linked certain groups and individuals and differentiated others. The plurality of factions, voices, groups which surface in the splintering field of modern art practice with its proliferation of *isms* distinguish themselves on the surface by their variety of styles, approaches, and even manifest aesthetic propositions. Beneath these differences of surface are even more fundamentally different aesthetic convictions.¹⁴ Making a rather gross model of the major aspects of modern art according to this general teleology will provide a framework for these individual practices.

Michael Levenson, in his *Genealogy of Modernism*, makes a useful distinction between two major strains of modern literary activity in England.¹⁵ His distinction separates those modern writers, such as George Moore and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (who insisted upon the autonomy of art as a scientific enterprise capable of discovering universal and absolute laws according to a rational logic and denied the ultimacy of the human subject) from those such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Ford Maddox Ford who focused upon the subjective vision of the individual experience as contingent, transient, and particular. These distinctions are operative within the visual arts as well, and betray strong traces

of inheritance from late nineteenth-century Symbolism, Realism, and Naturalism.¹⁶ A third category should be appended to Levenson's model: artists primarily occupied with a political, interventionist agenda who focused upon the conventions of systems of representation as the site of their operation. Each of these strains is identified with particular attitudes toward materiality in its crucial role within signification, ranging from assumptions about the inherent value of form, to form as an expressive trace of individual consciousness, to an analysis of form as social, contextual, and historical.

The first of these categories depends upon a rational process legitimating what is essentially a spiritual teleology, grounded in a belief in transcendence. This was the most direct descendent of the aesthetic positions inherent in Symbolism, with its attention to the particular phonetic qualities of words, the almost obsessive attention during the decadent phase of Symbolist art to the surface of the image, to color for its own sake, jewelled, encrusted, brilliant, excessive—all of this was at the service of the revelatory potential of material.¹⁷ The organization of material elements in such a practice was grounded upon their faith in a capacity to reveal, through a set of procedures which they termed rational and logical, absolute universal truths. The role of materiality in such an operation is its capacity to facilitate the revelation of and representation of that truth, even more, to *be* that truth, the manifest form and site in which a truth may be sought. The Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky articulated his evident concern with such formal values in the visual art: "Art, in giving birth to material effects, endlessly augments the reserve of spiritual values."¹⁸ The recognition that the attempted codification of formal elements into a systematic understanding of their properties, capacities, and relations is linked to a belief that through such a visual or verbal algebra the corresponding logical organization of the universe was being understood, represented, made evident through material codes. This spiritual practice, dependent upon notions of transcendent truth, placed a striking emphasis upon the investigation itself. The almost obsessive engagement of Kandinsky, for instance, with the formal elements of visual art, is not the result of "purely visual" or "purely formal" concern, for the work was conceived of as an agenda of investigation of a spiritual plane. The rigor and thoroughness with which this motivates an enumeration of the formal elements of the art practice puts a conspicuous emphasis upon the material of art itself.

Nowhere within the Symbolist aesthetic is there evidence of the same degree of organized investigation. That logic and ration are employed as the mode of systematizing the investigation on the material

plane, in combination with a belief that this will lead to the revelation of truth on the spiritual plane, is the telling point. The link formed between the practice of art and the self-definition of art as a science in the early twentieth century displays an attempt to legitimize its enterprise in the same fashion as other humanistic endeavors had done in the course of the nineteenth century. The legitimating aspect of science was, of course, that it was irrefutably predicated upon a belief in absolutes, in truth. For all its invoking of the notions of "spirituality" as if that were some mystical realm of occulted or obfuscated knowledge, the fact is that the methods of logical science and the guarantee of spiritual value all depended upon this same central notion—truth. Truth, in this sense, is not a referential value; a signifying practice which guarantees its own authority by pointing to the link between material investigations and their correspondence with universal laws is not taking those laws merely as a referent external to the sign system in which the material representation takes place. The truth value is assumed to lie within the sign, in the sense so aptly and exhaustively demonstrated by Jacques Derrida in his critique of the inherent truth value of the linguistic sign.¹⁹ This applies to both visual and verbal signs since the structure of those internal relations is the similar—though one could argue that the visual artists would insist that their "truth" was even more pure for needing less translation, for being self-evident. The visual representations of "energy," "forces," and "form" in such a teleology would be considered representations of these truths in themselves, rather than the mere naming of them or pointing to them.

In the second strain of modernism, identified as subjective, the construction of art as a signifying practice is completely different. According to the subjective mode there is no possibility of truth or absolute value since the emphasis is upon the representation of individual knowledge, perception, or experience. Rejection of ultimate law or of its guarantee by scientificized practices of art, does not entirely dispose of the procedures of rational logic, but formulates their application and effect very differently. The implicit "ultimate" of the subjective position is, naturally, that of the individual subject, that contingent and phenomenological entity with its emphasis upon the transient nature of existence and fleeting sensations of perception of a continually changing world.²⁰ In such a conception, the notion of any fixed absolute was ridiculous, and the individual experience coded into representation attempted accuracy in that activity in relation to the processes of knowing, experiencing, rather than to any assumed *essence*.²¹

This subjectively oriented modernism contained a split between

those who attempted to render the experience and sensation of perception with mimetic accuracy, using that experience as a reference point, and those who were interested in making the work an *actuality* capable of evoking sensation in accurate and effective ways. For the first group, the work of art still had a representative function, and the "objective correlative" of Pound, with his stress upon correctness (and all that such a notion is based upon in terms of categories necessary for such correspondence to occur), the direct treatment of the thing, and accuracy to one's own perceptions is the striking evidence of this position. "The sign still pointed, but to this world, not to any other."²² There is a complete rejection of a "strain after the ineffable" in this struggle, a total denial of the necessity for or even the possibility of transcendent truth. There is a continuum here along which a slippage occurs in moving from the notion of an accurately designating sign, with its capacity to function, as Pound said himself, as "the adequate symbol," to the notion of a presentational, creative mode. In characterizing Vorticism, Pound wrote that it was "the creative faculty as opposed to the mimetic"²³ while May Sinclair, in her advocacy of the Imagist position, wrote: "The Image is not a substitute; it does not stand for anything but itself. Presentation not Representation is the watchword of the school."²⁴

The parallels to the statements made by Cubist artists and the writers, such as Reverdy, making contemporary statements about its intentions, are unmistakable, and the implications of the notion of presentation will need to be addressed for its problematizing of signifying practices and the strong emphasis it placed upon the *effective* presence of material form.²⁵ For now, however, the point is to notice the importance that this places upon the accurate and well-regulated use of the materials of poetry and painting. No longer responsible to absolutes, not serving the cause of universal laws, the material means had no less a job to do in the service of accuracy and presentation. The bylaws of Imagism were as dogmatically severe as the tenets of Marinetti's Futurist Manifestos pretended to be. The regulated order of the material plane devolved from the belief in its existence as an order of *being* in itself, in the presentational mode, and as a way of *knowing* in the subjective mode—individual, personal, and inflected.

But there is a conflict in the rhetoric of the practitioners of this position. On the one hand, the ontological status of the work as *being* relieves it of designatory functions; it *is* and produces sensation in equal measure as the world. On the other hand, it is to be an accurate presentation of (individual and subjective) sensation, mimetic, though non-figurative, nonimitative in the conventional sense. The extent to which

such a conflict could be held within a single position is evident in the paragraph below, where Maurice Raynal seems unaware of the contradictory content of his statement:

But the true picture will constitute an individual object, which will possess an existence of its own apart from the subject that has inspired it. It will itself *surround* everything. In its combination of elements it will be a work of art, it will be an object, a piece of furniture if you like; better still, it will be a kind of formula, to put it more strongly, a word. In fact it will be, to the objects it represents, what a word is to the object it signifies.²⁶

That something simultaneously is, in self-sufficiency, *and* represents, is clearly contradictory. In both cases, however, the materiality of the signifier, whether it be word or image, is linked to its capacity to either evoke or designate sensation as it is transformed into a perception and that it in no case has a guaranteed truth value, only the relative value of accuracy within the experience of an individual subject. The emphasis placed upon materiality in this conception is no less rigorous or formalized than that of the spiritually oriented modern artists, but there is an evident tendency to retain certain figurative or referential traces within the image or the word which becomes distilled out, for example, of the Russian painters as they move toward clearly defined formal visual language or of Mondrian as he moves into complete geometric abstraction. There is a referent operative within this construction, that of either sensation, perception, or the world, which constrains the activity of the sign from the freedom to be the element of free play which a really presentational and creative mode would seem to both allow and require. It is bound by rules of designatory accuracy, subject to judgments upon its efficacy. Materiality becomes important as the arena within which such activity actually occurs, and the subjective modern practice is predicated upon the belief that it is a direct engagement with the *matter* of word and image that is the central activity of art.

A third strain of modern art practice was concerned with opposing the established social order through subverting the dominant conventions of the rules of representation. There was very little clear theoretical articulation available in the period from 1909 to 1923 of such a social critique in these artistic practices as there would be with the emergence of Surrealism and the work of Breton or, in another realm altogether, in the positions articulated by the Prague School semioticians. The Russian Constructivists had the most developed theoretical stance with respect to the possibilities of formal innovation as a political tool, a position which comes close to that of certain of the activist Berlin Dadaists in

the 1920s. But the works produced by the Dadaists in both Germany and Switzerland between 1916 and 1921, as well as some of the Futurists in both Russia and Italy, gave evidence of these principles in aesthetic form. The identification of the symbolic orders of language, image production, etc. as the primary site for engagement with political critique was a unique development within the practice of art, even as a manifestation of the so-called avant-garde. The use of such an approach certainly belongs to those artists associated with oppositional positions, whose rhetoric formulated strategies of attack or intervention consistent with such a conception. Such an attitude maximizes attention to the material properties of the signifier as the first, if not primary, line of attack. The Dadaist perception of the *order* of language or image as the site of the production and reproduction of a social order led these artists to subvert the normative modes of syntax, of the unified (and unifying) use of paint, of any of the systems by which a comfortable relation with signifying practice could be assured through familiarity with its formal devices.

There is a subtle line to be drawn here between the Dadaist engagement with the conventional forms of symbolic representation in order to subvert them and the aggressive rejection of aesthetics as such. In particular, in the work of Heartfield, Tzara and Hausmann, the systematic interrogation of the material aspects of convention led to formal innovations which in another context could have been considered artistic first and foremost. The distinguishing characteristic of this approach, however, is that it has as its primary agenda a political and social critique rather than having a purely aesthetic motivation. Rethinking the formal properties of visual and literary modes so that the logics of syntax, signification, and symbolic form could be subverted required engagement with material and innovative solutions. The symbolic order was so complicit in the destructive absurdity of so-called rational culture that artistic practice remained the one effective instrument for disruption of its normative practices. Intervention in the symbolic order as such offered the only possibility for action which could operate both *within* and *against* representational modes. A fracturing, fragmenting atomization of elements so that they could be recombined in sound poems, collage, assemblage, and performance was the result. In all of these, obviously, attention was paid to signifying practices in an attempt to pry them loose from their conventional relations or easy recuperation as readily consumable modes. This evident engagement with materiality as the site in which resistance could be produced characterizes the Dada rejection of the transparent sign in a practice whose politics are more readily appar-

ent as an aspect of the stance toward representation than that of either Cubists or Russian and Italian Futurists. The Dada activity foregrounds the ways in which value (signification) should be considered a process, rather than a product, as an ongoing activity of relations rather than an achieved form, however innovative.

If in the case of the Dada artists this investigation was unrigorous and unsystematic (almost necessarily, by definition, to continue the rejection of systematization in its false representation of rational order), then nowhere was the realm of materiality more prominently engaged, more foregrounded by that engagement, than in this realm of politically motivated art practice.

What becomes clear even in this generalized discussion of these three conceptual categories, which delineate a certain configuring of modern art practice, is that none of them manifest a concern for formal values for their own sake. The concern for truth, for mimetic accuracy and effective presentation, for intervention into the symbolic order of representational norms—none of these divorces the formal investigation from a motivation which has content or substantive value. It is therefore all the more astonishing to realize the extent to which generalizations about modern art have been manufactured to support its engagement with a supposedly pure formalism.

Modernism turned its back on the traditional idea of art as imitation and substituted the idea of art as autonomous activity. One of its most characteristic slogans was Walter Pater's assertion: "All art constantly aspires to the condition of music,"—music being, of all the arts, the most purely formal, the least referential, a system of signifiers without signifieds, one might say.²⁷

Debunking these generalizations and reshifting the terms of the discussion into the structure of relations among elements of signification within these art practices puts the discussion of materiality into context. The elaboration of individual artists' characteristic relation to the questions of formal manipulation can only be fully appreciated in relation to the premise that not only were modern artists not concerned with form for its own sake, as either nonreferential or nonsignifying, but that they were fundamentally engaged with a persistent investigation of the process of signification such that the relations between formal manipulation and content could not be dissolved. This engagement was manifested very differently by literary and visual arts, largely because of the inherent differences in the two as symbolic systems. The materials of language, which even at the phonemic level retain some associative

properties, remain referential to some or to a great degree, even in the case of sound poetry or concrete visual works, while visual materials (color, line, strokes) are more readily freed from referential value and certainly capable of slipping away from figurative organization or linguistic correlations generally used to pin down their ambiguities.

Attitudes toward Materiality in Modern Literature

In their 1925 *Foundations of Aesthetics*, I. A. Richards, C. K. Ogden, and J. Wood, delimiting the domains to be attended to in aesthetic evaluations, discussed "The Medium."

Every medium has as a material its own particular effect upon our impulses. Thus our feelings towards clay and iron, towards the organ and the piano, towards colloquial and ceremonial speech, are entirely different.²⁸

This blanket assessment of material, with its characteristically un-specific attention to either its motivation or actual performance can be found throughout discussions of art and literature from the early 1900s. However, defining an attitude toward materiality as it is either implied or articulated in the practice of modern poetics against which to examine the use of typography presents several problems. The mainstream of modern poetry in English and American writing can be traced to Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot and the modernist approach to both writing and interpretation which descends from them, but the range of typographic experiment among the pages of any of these moderns, even in the pages of *Blast*, is limited. This is not to say that there was *no* such experimentation within the anglo-american tradition, but simply to note that in the early twentieth century typographic innovation played a modest role among anglophone poets.²⁹ The more interesting uses of typography occur among the Dadaists, and Russian or Italian Futurists, where efforts to clearly articulate a *poetics* occur chiefly among the various Russian Futurists and Formalists, who, like the Italian Futurists and French poets were largely informed by a late Symbolist aesthetic.

There is a certain lack of symmetry, then, between the areas in which modern poetics are elaborated and in which a characteristically modern attitude toward materiality makes its impact felt in the use of typography. Materiality meant something other than typographic manipulation to the anglophone poets of the first part of the twentieth cen-

ture, acutely aware though they were of the visual structure and appearance of the work on the page, while among Italian and Russian Futurists, Cubist and Dada poets, typographic manipulation became widespread.

Literature of this period focused its attention upon formal elements of language at several different levels: among the poets of *zaum*, Futurism and Dada, phonetic, phonemic, and graphemic components were the atoms of composition; among the Imagists, Cubists, and some Futurists (Russian and Italian)³⁰ the primary focus was upon the word, upon assessing syntactic arrangements, making precise and highly adjudicated decisions in the structuring of their work; among the Dada writers and some Russian Futurists, the prime aim was to wrest language from its conventional usage, to disorient the reader by a confrontation with the specific characteristics of the language through tactics of disorientation, defamiliarization, etc. In each case, the relation between this attention to the formal elements and properties of language articulated a motivation to produce either truth, meaning, or effect; in no case was signification ignored.

For the *zaum* poets of the Russian Futurist movement, the attempt to understand language at the fundamental level of sound was motivated by a drive to subvert the possibility of conventional meaning and its pedestrian concerns in order to provide access either to the categories of universals or immediate emotional activity. In this they were much engaged with the legacy of symbolism and the concept of the self-valuable word.³¹ "It was symbolism that propounded the self-valuableness and constructive nature of the poetic word." As in the semiotically influenced characterization of Pavel Medvedev and Mikhail Bakhtin from 1928:

The symbolist word neither represents nor expresses. It signifies. Unlike representation and expression, which turn the word into a conventional signal for something external to itself, this "signification" preserves the concrete material fullness of the word, at the same time raising its semantic meaning to the highest degree.³²

In two significant essays written in 1912 and 1913, "The Word as Such" and "The Letter as Such," Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksander Kruchenyk outlined the program of their poetic concerns. For Khlebnikov in particular, the intention to derive *from* language and present *in* language his systematic understanding of what he took to be the total logic of the universe focused his attention on the prime syllables of the Rus-

sian language as the atoms of meaning in a kind of absolute linguistic arithmetic.³³

A work of art is the art of the word.³⁴

. . . wisdom may be broken down into truths contained in separate sounds: *sh*, *m*, *v*, etc. We do not yet understand these sounds. We confess that honestly. But there is no doubt that these sound sequences constitute a series of universal truths passing before the predawn of our soul.³⁵

For Khlebnikov, Kruchenyk, and to a great extent Zdanevich, these "truths" relate to a state of pure emotion, freed from the constraints imposed upon them by social forms, able to be accessed by "appeals over the head of the government straight to the population of feelings . . ."³⁶

The end aim of this blend of subjective and universal "truths," however, motivated the Russian poets to a direct engagement with the physicality of language and of its written forms. In "The Letter as Such," Khlebnikov and Kruchenyk emphatically declared the impact of the visual form upon its meaning: ". . . a word written in one particular handwriting or set in a particular typeface is totally distinct from the same word in different lettering."³⁷

What is under discussion in these works, whose influence upon Russian Futurism finds its echo throughout the notes of men as diverse in their intentions and practices as Mayakovsky, Kandinsky, and Shklovsky, is not a "free play of signifiers" but a calculated attempt at manipulation of material elements such as that which surfaces in the Shklovsky's theoretically articulate position as early as 1919:

[An] attack against both the traditional critical school, with its emphasis on content and social meaning in literature, and the new Symbolist school with its emphasis on philosophy, mysticism and musicality. The Formalists sought a reinterpretation of literature that would stress the importance of purely linguistic elements and artistic devices: sounds and words, structure and style.³⁸

This Formalist approach, with its more clarified objectives, aims, and mechanistic procedures, moved beyond the messy, somewhat chaotic and jejune activities of the Futurists with their attempts to loosen the word from its "traditional subservience to meaning"³⁹ (really its subservience to traditional meaning) while simultaneously insisting upon the importance of a direct link between sound and sense beyond the limits of reason or convention, and, in Shklovsky's case, the importance of structures in prose. The codification of linguistic approaches which

characterized the Formalist method is more symptomatic of the transition toward a modernist critical stance than it is of the more hybrid and heterogeneous modern art practice from which it drew some of its inspiration and some of its practitioners. But in both cases what is brought to the forefront is the impossibility of separating the formal element from its signifying effect.⁴⁰ While this is a somewhat reductive description of the relations between Russian Futurism, *zaum*, and the strains of poetic, linguistic, and prose analysis leading to Formalism, it has the purpose of indicating the framework within which Zdanevich's *zaum* conceived of its material concerns. There was rapid evolution within the wing of the theoretical group most closely linked to the Moscow Linguistic Circle of awareness that any aesthetic investigation necessarily had implications within the *social* (if not expressly *political*) realm in which the symbolic discourse (language, image, film) under investigation was operating. The Russian linguists closer to Opajaz, meanwhile, remained more engaged with the linguistic activity for its own sake (so-called) and with language study as an instrument for understanding the critical complexities of signification (with the linguistic domain serving as a paradigmatic example of the conceptual basis of production).⁴¹ Attention to materiality, therefore, is intimately related to the social critique and utopian agenda of various of the Russian poets.

A concern with materiality also evidences itself in English modernism among the Imagists, whose formulation of the terms of their poetics displays the conspicuous manifesto, in their concerns with tone as well as with the prescriptive rules for production so characteristic of the period. The overriding concern of the Imagists for *accuracy* caused them to focus on the *formal* structure of the work as primary: "Modern poetry [. . .] is groping for some principle of self-determination to be applied to the making of the poem—not lack of government, but government from within."⁴²

The terms of formality are *literary*, poetry must be self-conscious about its *poetics* if it is to succeed in defining itself as a new form, and the terms of those poetics enumerate themselves according to the properties of poetic language and composition. Briefly paraphrased, these include: direct treatment, minimal use of adjectives, a quality of hardness as if cut of stone, individuality of rhythm, the use of the exact word, etc.⁴³ These are all attributes of a spare and reduced accuracy, motivated in reaction to what the Imagists considered the verbal excesses of their immediate nineteenth-century predecessors. It is not merely the substance of these poetic ordinances that is significant, but their *fact*, their existence as a self-conscious regulation of poetic activity drawing atten-

tion to its means and methods, of poetry defining itself in terms of poetics. In terms of substance, the Imagist doctrine presents certain problems. The requirement of accurate designation, over and over again, is a concept which implies a representational relation between the present poem and an absent value. This further assumes an indivisibly present form, based upon the assumption that signification constitutes the complete fact of the work. We can repeat May Sinclair's statement here: "The Image is not a substitute; it does not stand for anything but itself. Presentation, not Representation is the watchword of the school."⁴⁴ And beside it put these statements of Ezra Pound's, first, on modern poetry, then Vorticism: "It presents. It does not comment." "Vorticism is interested in the creative faculty as opposed to the mimetic."⁴⁵

This confusion, conflict between a self-sufficient presentational mode for poetry and a well-regulated representational mode does not negate the overriding insistence upon the relation of linguistic material to its value: "The Image, I take it, is Form. But it is not pure form. It is form and substance."⁴⁶ The primacy of the medium is evident, though never at the expense of its capacity to produce meaning according to the terms of linguistic operation—the word as signifier is still linked to the absent signified even if both are remote from any mimetic relation to the *world*. In writing of works of art at an exhibition in 1914, Pound wrote, "These things are great art because they are sufficient in themselves."⁴⁷

It was this insistence on autonomy, self-sufficiency, which allowed such emphasis on the poem as structure and form to be sustained; again this is a question of ontological status, the poem is to *be*, rather than to exist as a vessel of form conveying or holding a separate meaning. Its beingness therefore refers only to itself, its existence as a work must be poetical, and, in accordance with the rules, sufficient and necessary to define its operations. But this idea applies equally to other works of art in other media, which also, necessarily, find their own identity according to the specificity of their medium. In the well-known cliché of literary history, Pound was searching for immediately apprehendable linguistic value replete with the resonant associations of the ideogram. The apocryphal tale of his misguided enthusiasm for Fenellosa's misunderstanding of the Chinese character links Pound's sense of the presentational to his insistence upon the "self-evident" quality of form in his writings on the visual arts. The modernist position would exaggerate this to an extreme, reducing the poem to its structural features, which, arguably, is

at odds with the modern insistence that the work is the presentation of emotions, perceptions, psychic events.

As modern poetry came into its own among the poets of Russian Futurism and the English Imagists, the poets Apollinaire, Reverdy, and Marinetti, writing in France and Italy, had their formation within the aesthetic crucible of Symbolist poetry, and the influence of Mallarmé as both poet and theorist remained dominant through the first decades of the century.⁴⁸

He recommended the dismantling of traditional syntax, insisting that the means of poetry lay in the inherent magic of its concrete components. The word was to be liberated from the matrix of centuries of syntactical accretions.⁴⁹

Among the modern writers, Apollinaire, arguably the most prominent figure of the early part of the century in France, dismissed the mystical sensibility and concentrated on the concrete aspects of this procedure.⁵⁰ Apollinaire and Reverdy, as poets involved with both the practice of their own art and the critical discussion of the visual arts, make a convenient point on which to link the discussion of literary and visual domains. Both served to articulate very distinctly the notion of the *presentational* on which Cubism claims its ultimate aesthetic legitimacy. That there could be such congruent overlap between visual and poetic aesthetics in this period is proof of the extent to which the definition of the identity of both visual and literary arts was dominated by the unifying attention to the signifying presence of material. Again, it was in the decades after 1930 that the division between disciplines was reinforced according to the specific qualities of the media under discussion, not in the decades of the 1910s and 1920s in which artistic experiment blurred these boundaries.

One of the bases for Apollinaire's new poetic language was its attention to both the sonoric and associative properties of language. Apollinaire was a poet employing the grammar of ordinary speech,⁵¹ but according to methods of collage and combination, which appropriated the material from daily life to present it in the form of cut-up juxtaposition, echoing the mode of Cubist collage and Dada poetry. This presentation of language as material, its capacity to be operated upon in the same sense as the visual stuff of newspapers, wallpaper, or cloth, is central to Apollinaire's sensibility. His early criticisms of Marinetti's reactionary mode, correctly perceived as such by Apollinaire in spite of their apparent radicality, demonstrate dramatically his rejection of the tradi-

tional role of language as representational: "The 'Words In Liberty' of Marinetti lead to . . . an offensive return to description and in this they are didactic and anti-lyrical."⁵²

Description subordinated the poem to a meaning-bearing role while presentation allowed it full status as extant. The importance of this position in Apollinaire's sensibility becomes even more evident as it recurs thematically in his works on the Cubist painters, where the terms of a presentational rhetoric are convincingly argued as *the* distinguishing feature of modern art. "Cubism differs from the old schools of painting in that it is not an art of imitation, but an art of conception which tends toward creation."⁵³

In his poetic practice Apollinaire anticipates many of the stylistic features of the Dada poets whose first works, in 1916 and 1917, proceeded from the collage and cut-up techniques of which Apollinaire was already making use.

The Dada poetics of Tzara are not only never stated clearly as a program, but the resistance on his part to do so demonstrates Tzara's desire to subvert systematization and theoretical metalanguage as an authoritative gloss on practice. The poetics he engages in the period from 1916 to 1920, as they are evident in the work produced in the pages of *Dada*, are aggressively materialist in their continual use of found fragments of language, recombined in radical disregard for the crafts of a tradition he disdained for both its rational and romantic claims. Tzara's poetics is one of continual *negation*, in which even the logic of a premise must continually be held for question, reversed, undermined, and ridiculed.⁵⁴ Tzara's poetics take the materials of language as the very substance through which an attack on the symbolic order of representation may be launched. Interference in the simple production of meaning is a central tenet of Dada as Tzara practiced it, and material is one of the means by which such interference may be effected.⁵⁵

Attention to material in language has a heightened quality in the poetic metalanguage of this period, one which forces the terms of poetic definition into self-referential vocabulary vis-à-vis the actual elaboration of a *poetics*. This attention finds itself paralleled in the visual arts, where the discussion of material elements takes place within the larger frame of the evolution of the notion of the "purely visual." The character of this investigation in the modern visual arts is curiously consistent with that taking place in literature and, not surprisingly, the typography which was a logical and evident link between the two domains presented no conflict to either discipline. This would emerge when the modernist revision of this activity insisted upon a more rigid distinction between dis-

ciplines and an exclusive identity dependent on specific qualities of formal elements of each rather than on an aesthetic investigation of the terms of signification.

Materiality and Modern Art

Art is the exploitation of the medium.⁵⁶

This clear attitude toward the process of signification had become one of the prevailing features of early twentieth-century art practice. Articulated earlier by Maurice Denis, this notion cropped up frequently in paraphrase throughout the early 1900s, such as in the following example from an English critic in the *Egoist*.

The important feature of a picture is not that it represents or reminds us of a given object, however strange this statement may sound, but that it is a group of very complicated lines and colors arranged rhythmically. A picture is first of all a pattern and not just the reproduction of a certain thing.⁵⁷

The idea that an image's primary mode of *being* was in its means of expression was already an important implication of both nineteenth-century realism's notion of "retinal truth" and the Impressionist continuation of the "scientific" investigation of optical principles in the production of works of visual art. But the extent to which the form was freed from dependence on any mimetic or figurative value in the rhetoric defending modern art at the beginning of the century was unprecedented in the history of Western painting. There are two important aspects to this: first, the increased emphasis on the investigation of material; second, the problematic relation with language which accompanies the development of a visual art making claims for its formal purity and visual autonomy. Discussion of the first aspect continues the themes of the investigation of materiality in literature, though the important differences between the way *materiality* is conceived of operating in two such distinct domains needs clarification as well. Discussion of the second foregrounds the emergence of oppositional distinctions between visual arts and literature which are later entrenched in modernism and which result in the exclusion of typography from historical and critical consideration.

A determined attention to free formal elements from referential

and representational constraints first manifests itself among various abstract artists of the early twentieth century. The 1913–14 compositions of the Russian artists—the Abstractionist Kandinsky, the Suprematist Malevich, and the Rayonist Larionov—were among the first non-figurative works to attempt to exemplify an aesthetic position in which reference was called, very differently in each case, into question. Simultaneously, in the decade following 1912, concern with what was termed *concrete* painting became evident in the work of the Orphic Cubist Robert Delaunay while a complete discussion of materiality was formulated in Cubist painting and the accompanying critical rhetoric with its insistence on “the idea of the representational autonomy of the pictorial means.”⁵⁸ The Italian Futurists canvases were less prone to the degree of nonrepresentational abstraction which was found among Russian painters and among the various Cubist groups, but the Futurist studies of rhythm and movement and the Futurist use of collage abstraction demonstrated a sympathetic engagement with formal and material means.

As in the field of literature, the motivations which stimulated this concentrated investigation of form were varied. For instance, to begin with, among the Cubists three themes entwined in the investigation of the materiality of visual form: an interest in the inherent properties of color, an exploration of nonillusionistic formal composition, and an appropriation of fragments of real material or stuff into collage paintings.⁵⁹ Of these, the interest in color gained intensity from the Symbolists Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon, whose canvases, with their encrusted excrecence of paint, pushed the use of coloristic indulgence beyond any evident meaning-bearing value.

Among the Orphic Cubists, Delaunay stands out as an artist concerned to examine the properties of color within a sensibility toward the visual which he stated was painting’s only true concern.⁶⁰ But while the display of color and investment in its properties evidently beg the question of the visual, the general Cubist involvement with a rhetoric struggling to define an autonomous activity of representation engages itself with other, more subtle, issues of *visuality* and its materialist specificity. For if among the Orphic Cubists the quasi-mystical discussion of color as “energy,” “pure form” capable of universal harmonies etc. prevailed, the analytic and synthetic approaches to Cubism detailed the guiding intention which generated their painting according to very different principles, largely centered on questions of reference.

Cubism wrenched the pictorial firmly away from reference to any transcendent plane or, also nominally, to any natural one: that is, it negated the concerns of both spiritualism and mimeticism, but did not

negate the referential function of the image or reduce it to nonfigurative formality. From the point of its advent, with the 1907 paintings of Picasso, Cubism passed through successive stages as an analytic tool for the description of a perceptual reality to a synthetic mode of composition intended to “transform the object into an object of art.”⁶¹ For the Cubists, it was the nature of visual *experience* to which the realization in paint was to be accurately subject, thus substituting a phenomenological skepticism for the belief in the essential *thing* central to Orphic Cubism. Witness the influential essay written in 1912 by the two Cubist painters Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger:

It therefore amazes us when well-meaning critics try to explain the remarkable difference between the forms attributed to nature and those of modern painting by a desire to represent things not as they appear, but as they are. As they are! How are they, what are they? According to them, the object possesses an absolute form, an essential form, and we should suppress chiaroscuro and traditional perspective in order to present it. What simplicity! An object has not one absolute form, it has many.⁶²

This rejection of either universal absolutes or essential forms shifted the discussion of art practice into a focus onto what was repeatedly termed the “pictorial fact.” Within the terms of this pictorial facticity, the emphasis upon a material manipulation held great sway, as is evident in this statement by Pierre Reverdy:

We are at a period of creation in which people no longer tell stories more or less agreeably, but create works of art that, in detaching themselves from life, find their way back into it, because they have an existence of their own apart from the evocation or reproduction of the things of life. Because of that, the art of today is an art of great reality. But by this must be understood artistic reality, and not realism—which is the genre most opposed to us.⁶³

The artistic reality of the work, its autonomous quality, was, in the case of Cubism, as in the case of Vorticism, grounded in granting to formal elements a clear ontological status. Again, while grounded in a different set of motivations, Vorticism shared this belief with the Cubists who had exercised at least nominal influence upon them. Not surprisingly, the substantive content of Ezra Pound’s 1914 statement contains clear echoes of the writing on Cubism published in the years immediately preceding:

The Vorticist can represent or not as he likes. He depends—depends for his artistic effect, upon the arrangement of spaces and line, on the pri-

mary media of his art. A resemblance to natural forms is of no consequence one way or the other.⁶⁴

The "arrangement of spaces and line," with very few exceptions, either linked to the expression of universal absolutes or retained the figurative traces of earlier modes of visual expression, simply removing them from the pretense of serving a mimetic purpose, that is, supposedly relieving the work from any order outside its own arrangement to which it could be compared.⁶⁵ Even without "resemblance" visual art still "possesses a substance of its own which is a feat which presupposes nothing less than genius."⁶⁶

This "substance" was exactly that which was constituted by the material fact of its existence, its *pictoriality*. Insistence on the capacity of a painting to *be* in its own terms was critical to all aspects of Cubism, whether of the analytic, synthetic variety predicated on visual experience or the orphic exploration of supposedly pure form, as the following series of statements, with their similarity of formulations, makes clear. First, Apollinaire in 1913:

Orphic cubism is the other important trend of the new art school. It is the art of painting new structures out of elements which have not been borrowed from the visual sphere, but have been created entirely by the artist himself, and been endowed by him with fullness of reality. The works of the orphic artist must simultaneously give a pure aesthetic pleasure, a subject. This is pure art.⁶⁷

These ideas were echoed by Roger Fry in 1912: "not . . . to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life."⁶⁸ Then Pierre Reverdy, 1917: "Cubism is an eminently plastic art; but an art of creation, not of reproduction or interpretation."⁶⁹ And finally, Waldemar George, 1921: "Cubism is an end in itself, a constructive synthesis; an artistic fact, a formal architecture independent of external contingencies, an autonomous language and not a means of representation."⁷⁰

Gleizes, Metzinger, Apollinaire, and the other prominent critics responsible for the influence of Cubist painting—André Salmon, Max Jacob, and Maurice Raynal among others—continually reiterated the stance so simply stated in Reverdy's formulation: "A work of art cannot content itself with being a representation; it must be a presentation. A child that is born is presented, he represents nothing."⁷¹ The complexity of this bald assertion, and the difficulties of taking the analogy into any analysis of a work of visual and verbal art in terms of its signifying activity,

is not addressed by Reverdy, for whom the simple statement grants, by edict, full autonomy to an art object. Gleizes and Metzinger transform the vague rhetoric of these descriptive statements into prescriptive rules for the manipulation of the actual elements of pictorial composition and use of paint which they present as didactic formulae, using the linguistic coercives of "should" and "must": "We must also contrive to break up, by large restful surfaces, all regions in which activity is exaggerated by excessive contingencies" or "Taste immediately dictates a rule: we must paint so that no two portions of similar extent are to be found in the picture."

These insistent statements, couched in discussion of formal elements, make clear that the activity of the painter is prescribed. For the majority of Cubist painters (in distinction to the Russians and the Orphists) the source of this *law* is *not* a transcendent universal plane, which exists disembodied from the material world. Instead, Gleizes and Metzinger have a conviction that significant form, in Roger Fry's well-known sense, has its own absolute values: inherent, apparent, and apprehensible as well as stable and fixed. There is a rightness and wrongness to certain combinations, certain designs, certain arrangements of form to which we somehow, magically, instinctively respond:

The diversity of the relations of line to line must be indefinite; on this condition it incorporates the quality, the unmeasurable sum, of the affinities perceived between what we discern and what pre-exists within us: on this condition a work of art moves us.⁷²

The *preexisting* disposition is a response to an effective use of form, which remains linked to that material form, engaged with it, rather than transporting the individual to another plane; in this the influence of Roger Fry is evident:

. . . the graphic arts arouse emotions in us by playing upon what one may call the overtones of some of our primary physical needs. They have, indeed, this great advantage over poetry, that they can appeal more directly and immediately to the emotional accompaniments of our bare physical existence.⁷³

It will be necessary to return to the assumptions inherent in this statement in order to discuss the more subtle problem of presence and the myth of immediacy and accessibility of the visual mode within modern art practice, but for the moment it seems important to pose the question again of the relation between the evident concern with formal manipulation and the sense of the relation of such activity to signification. In

reading through Gleizes and Metzinger it is possible to imagine a mode of graphic composition derived from their prescriptions in which no human or natural figure would appear, no landscape, horizon, no organizing viewpoint in the perspectival sense. But in fact, and this is very important, the Cubist works which depart from the use of subject matter into utterly nonreferential domains are the *exception* rather than the rule.

Now it can be argued, and has been extensively, that the Cubist retention of recognizable imagery is *incidental*, that the subject matter was merely an *excuse* for the formal exercise.⁷⁴ The difficulty in sustaining this argument, in the face of the insistence of the Cubists themselves upon the pictorial *fact* of their work, is that the image remains one composed out of visual elements which carry recognizable meaning.⁷⁵ It is only within the context of the image's capacity to be recognized as a portrait, still life, etc., that the work's formal manipulations retain their value. This recognition allows the treatment to register in its specificity; the very *cubist* character of the work is significant insofar as the alteration of traditional graphic conventions may be perceived. The point is not to insist on the primacy of the subject matter, but to signal the discrepancy between apparent rhetoric and actual practice among the Cubists. This is important in main part because of the ways in which the modernist revision of this material emphasized the formal investigation as if there were no signifying trace left within the pictorial exercise.

Opposing the concept of a *pure formality* to the notion of a *signifying trace* leads back to the Cubist insistence on materiality in either case: the formalism of Gleizes, Metzinger, even Delaunay, is one obsessively investigating elements of pictoriality in a painterly manifestation. This is the sole mode of the image's existence, while the signifying practices of Braque, Picasso, the other mainstream Cubists following their innovative lead, make the material creation of the perceptual experience the legitimating fact of its existence. The tenets of this attention to materiality, as enunciated in Gleizes and Metzinger's essay, demonstrate their involvement with formal investigations of what they felt to be fundamental rules for understanding the graphic vocabulary of visual art. The discussion of materiality defined by such a practice cannot be dismissed as incidental, nor can it be contained as self-sufficient. Both of these claims will be asserted within the modernist rewriting of the Cubist and other modern art practices—initially evacuating content from the formal exercises, and, second, promoting their autonomy as *pure* visual works. The Cubist painters, like the Russian abstract formalists, were engaged in the more complex investigation of the ways a signifying practice, in elaborating its own means and mechanisms, could make

that material realm both an instrument of exploration and the manifest form of its practice, thereby increasing the resonance of signification through material form.

Among the Russians, there are also a number of divergent trends to account for in even a general discussion of artistic engagement with materiality. A concern with *faktura*, the making, production, of a work, be it literary or visual, continually informs the attitudes of artists and poets from the first Futurist stirrings of the group dominated by the Burliuk brothers, Mikhail Larionov, and Natalia Gontcharova. In their rapid evolution through Neo-Primitivism to Cubo-Futurism and Rayonnism, between 1908 and 1912, these artists' expression of their utopian expectations for the project of the arts engaged them in discussion of its modes of *production*.⁷⁶ Larionov developed, with the aid of Ilia Zdanevich, a theory of Rayonnism which had as its central tenet an interest in portraying objects through the depiction of the *rays* which emanate from their essential *being*.⁷⁷ While many of Larionov's compositions lose any capacity to be recognized as objects, there can be no doubt that an investigation of the so-called true nature of real things—their *essence*—was fundamental to Larionov's pictorial enterprise. This idiosyncratic direction splintered from the more general concern David Burliuk had defined when he identified *faktura* as the visual fact of painting and everything about its making—brushstrokes, color, texture, all of what resulted in its surface condition.⁷⁸

This notion of *faktura* was equally evident in poetic activity—Zdanevich, Kruchenyk, Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky all use the term in their discussion of the linguistic construction of writing.⁷⁹ To make the implications of this interest for the visual arts specific requires introducing a distinction between the phenomenological orientation of the Cubo-Futurists, with their interest in the depiction of visual experience—and the nonrepresentational Suprematism of Malevich. A materiality put at the service of (even if it is the sole means of realizing) a *sensation* has, in the work of the Cubo-Futurist Burliuk, the instrumental task of facilitating this sensual, sensational, understanding. Malevich, however, moved beyond any representational function whatsoever in his Suprematist endeavor, in his efforts to define *nonobjectivity*, as Jean-Claude Marcade explains:

It is absolute non-objectivity that the Suprematist pictorial action makes visible, and this absolute non-figuration does not represent, but very simply is—it presents the non-objective world, "puts it forth," makes it "vor-stelling."⁸⁰

Malevich, as Marcade goes on to say, was committed to the pictorial domain for its capacity to make a “negative revelation of *that which is*, that manifestation of that which does not appear.”⁸¹ The concept of a single living world, universal and nonrepresentable, underlies Malevich’s suprematism. The contradiction in his position is that it is his engagement with the unrepresentable, his desire to render its unrepresentability, that compels him to “a revelation of the pictorial as such,”⁸² where the pictorial is defined as the “flat, colored surface” of “absolute planarity.” If Larionov’s concern with materiality in the pursuit of his Rayonist *essences* was idiosyncratic and largely without influence, and Malevich’s Suprematism ineffable, sublime, and paradoxically negative in its engagement with the pictorial facts whose rhetoric he articulated in terms which anticipate the vocabulary of Clement Greenberg with a nearly preternatural resemblance, the work of Kandinsky mainstreamed the articulation of formal devices through both the tradition of painting and also by affecting the tenets of design as developed in the Bauhaus.

In the Bauhaus curriculum the organized discourse of graphic vocabulary became a systematic application without necessary attention to spiritualist considerations, though that was a frequent and persistent strain in the institutional curriculum. Kandinsky’s well-known concern with the spiritual dimension of his work was the motivation behind his initial elaboration of the *rules* of graphic form he felt evidenced the existence of universal *laws* of pure form. For Kandinsky the new art required: “a composition, exclusively based on the discovery of law, of the combination of movement, of consonance and dissonance of forms, a composition of drawing and color.”⁸³

Kandinsky’s position on this point was made very clear in his 1913 publication, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. He remained aligned with this stance throughout his life, arguing for the “inner life behind the external appearance of things” and for a study centered on the “fundamental characteristics of the material plane.”⁸⁴ The rejection of figurative value, of the mimetic subordination of image to the terms of the “real” visual experience, did not necessarily imply a shift to a formality for its own sake in the visual arts of this period. On the contrary, for Kandinsky, all such investigation “expresses an inner, dramatic state of mind,” for he considered the basic principle of pictorial activity to be “the purposeful stirring of the human soul.”⁸⁵

Kandinsky conceived of his painting as an investigation of universal order, of a state of mind and consciousness. For Piet Mondrian, however, a similarly executed process of reductivism and abstraction had a slightly different conceptual base, drawing on theosophical beliefs in combina-

tion with a search for a genuinely pure plasticity. In Mondrian’s work a distinctly rigorous and intellectualized rhetoric replaces the spiritual and emotive vocabulary of Kandinsky. While Mondrian works his investigations through similar attention to pictoriality as materiality, and similarly concentrates upon the investigation of universals, he believed that “the design and form in themselves create the reality in which universal harmony may be visually expressed.”⁸⁶ Advocating this neoplasticism, he wrote in 1922, “. . . all arts are plastic, until now, all arts have been descriptive.”⁸⁷

Plasticity meant the specific character of elemental color and elemental form and an exhaustive atomization of the pictorial into its “fundamental” units, such that they could be elaborated as a systematic discourse. The result led Mondrian to “the conclusion that aesthetic harmony is fundamentally different from natural harmony . . .”⁸⁸

Reaching this point by 1916–17, Mondrian had rendered the pictorial domain autonomous, had succeeded in allowing that an entire activity of signification resided in the manipulation of plasticity according to the rules of a nonreferential and nonobjective discourse. Such a discourse was not dependent on external rules of order, even if they were capable of revealing or expressing supposedly universal harmonies. At that point, nothing existed to support such an investigation, to be its arena of operations, except the materiality of the pictorial domain. Here the signifying practice engages itself most directly with a materiality which Cubism, Futurism, Rayonism, and Suprematism also take into account, but now it is foregrounded in the potential which its recognition enables, for the production of signification it facilitates, even brings into being.⁸⁹

So while the Russian abstract artists managed to eliminate figurative elements from their pictorial vocabulary, their investigation of formal elements remained bound up in a search for values whose transcendent qualities linked the graphic elements in a system of referential operations which belied the rhetoric of a simple, “pure” visuality for its own sake. Attention to form was not reduced to a formalism, but kept in the realm of a play between the apparent elements, their assumed essence: between the present materiality and an absent realm invoked as the universal. The French, on the other hand, continually returned their visual experiments to the plane of discourse, but retained figurative traces which invoke the habits of the more pedestrian sense of reference—such as “referring to” the elements depicted in a pictorial illusion. The materiality of elements of collage in the painted canvases which included them added a further dimension of play. Such an ele-

ment could not be merely or completely reduced to a surrogate, a stand-in, or sign for the referred-to context or object. The collaged element remained an object in-itself, present and replete, as well as serving in its capacity as a stand-in for an absent signified and an absent referent. Its undeniable material presence introduced considerable complexity into its signifying function.

Among the Italian Futurists, the themes of movement and dynamism, the study of speed, motivated the investigation of the pictorial means necessary to render these sensations or produce these effects. Constrained by their referential qualities, the mimetic effects of Severini, Boccioni, Carra have a visual dynamic in their frenetic shattering of pictorial unity. The work of Balla, in the studies of movement as a pattern of rhythm, escaped referential traces. While their formal, visual expression has its own characteristic look, the aesthetic propositions of the Futurist painters are poorly articulated with respect to either materiality or representation.

Before going on to the discussion of the problems of postulating a "purely visual" mode and its oppositional relation to language, it seems appropriate to make mention of collage with respect to this notion of materiality. The Cubist, Futurist, and Dada collage in the work of Schwitters, Hausmann, Carra, Heartfield, Picasso, Braque have in common the direct appropriation of materials into the fabrication of an image. This activity has been discussed frequently for its implications in the shift from a representational to a presentational mode among these artists, but in the Cubist use the subordination of such materials to their role within an image puts them at variance with the Dada use—particularly that of Schwitters—of these elements as material as such. This is not to imply that Schwitters was attempting to eliminate all meaning or image value from the elements; on the contrary, he seemed to be able to maximize their value. He insisted that every line, color, and form had a definite expression and impact, but he did not use these fragments within the more conventional still-life arrangements which bound the Cubists to their traditional artistic lineage.⁹⁰ The case of Hausmann parallels this (as does Tzara's use of typographic form to betray the source of origin of the phrases he clips together into poetry) for Hausmann uses material qualities to make the images resonate back into the social field in which they were produced. For the Dada artists materiality became one more leveragable element to bring to bear in the full force of their socially pointed critique. Grosz, Herzfelde, and Hausmann, writing in 1920, made a strong point of negating the conventional distinction between "tendency" art and "formalist," arguing that

the two could not be separated within a single work.⁹¹ The implication is their recognition that all formal values carried a social force and that all social, thematic concerns must be worked out in appropriate formal terms. In addition, the use of "real" material was intended to grant the work the status of the real:

The dadaists believed in all seriousness that only by their methods could they get closer to visible reality. Huelsenbeck wrote about their new material: "The sand pasted on, the pieces of wood, the wisps of hair lend it the same degree of reality as that possessed by an idol of a moloch, into whose red-hot arms infant victims were placed."⁹²

The similarity to the Cubist position, stated here more modestly, is unmistakable, and once again the collapse of the notion of materiality with reality, with *stuff* as *being* rather than *representing* is apparent in Maurice Raynal. "But the true picture will constitute an individual object, which will possess an existence of its own, apart from the subject that has inspired it."⁹³ And Georges Braque,

The *papiers collés*, the imitation wood—and other elements of the same nature—which I have used in certain drawings, also make their effect through the simplicity of the facts, and it is this that has led people to confuse them with *trompe l'oeil*, of which they are precisely the opposite.⁹⁴

The Cubists, Dadaists, and even Suprematists—in a different way—granted to their works clear ontological status on the basis of material fact.

. . . and all that we make, all that we construct, are realities. I call them *images*, not in Plato's sense (namely, that they are only reflections of reality), but I hold that these images are the reality itself and that there is no reality beyond this reality except when in our creative process we change the image: then we have new realities.⁹⁵

The engagement with the material aspects of the visual domain was accompanied by an assertion of the *self-sufficiency* of the visual realm by which can be understood an independence from both referential domains in the natural world and any necessary relation to a linguistic equivalent. To understand the way in which this notion of a visual presence comes into its mythic stature in the modern period, it is necessary to inquire first into the terms by which the visual made its claim to autonomy and self-sufficiency, and why.

The desire of visual artists to determine an exclusive province of op-

erations, distinct from the colonizing imperialism of the literary domain, explains the development of such a stance. That the pictorial realm had its own means was an ancient notion, but that it might be realizing its own *ends* was the novel feature of the conceptual base by which early modern art articulated its practice. During that period from 1900 to 1920 which I have been discussing, no explicit use of the terms *presence* or *absence* or the implications of these concepts for signification in general were expressed. And though the establishment of a *purely visual* category of existence was being advocated through the work of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Metzinger, and others, many of the operations engaging materiality slipped readily (as in the case of *faktura*) between visual and verbal, literary, domains. However, as the concept of *visuality* is purified and reified within a modernist stance, the concept of *presence* inherent to it will emerge from latent formulation into a fullblown and determinative criterion. One of the changes symptomatic of the shift from early twentieth-century modern art to midcentury modernism is the rigidifying distinction between literary and visual practices according to an exclusive and oppositional set of characterizations that pit absence and presence against each other as conceptual operations on which each of the literary and visual arts gain their identity as signifying practices. Tracing the concept of the *purely visual* will establish the historical foundation of the emergence of this antagonistic difference. Metzinger's attitude in a 1910 "Notes on Painting," for example, already outlines the oppositional program according to which the visual gains its purity: "Rejecting every ornamental, anecdotal or symbolic intention, he achieves a painterly purity hitherto unknown."⁹⁶

The notion of "pure" visual, optical modes of either perception or representation became a byword of modern art practices. While there are demonstrable qualities specific to the visual domain whose replication in linguistic surrogates is inadequate at best and always a re-representation dependent on finding approximate correlations between two nonequivalent modes, the campaign to define and defend visual purity was intimately bound up in a motivation to separate the visual from the linguistic and literary domain. This defensive tactic demonstrates the extent to which the literary was seen as a threat to the identity of visual art, and justifiably so given the history of the two domains. It is a fact, for instance, that until the beginning of the twentieth century, the visual arts had been deeply complicit with literary references, linguistic titles, and the recognizable qualities of images and figures within the works such that the identification of visual elements in terms of language equivalents was hardly difficult. *Ut pictura poesis* designated ac-

tivity in which the ultimate reference was always the linguistic term. The possibility of a nonreferential, language-independent, pictorial mode changed this. The idea that images might slip out from the defining boundaries of linguistic reference opened the conceptual possibility that they might come into their own, that there might be an "own" to come into. Reverdy, writing in 1917, said:

By the titles with which they were obliged to complete their works, they left the plastic domain and entered a literary symbolism which, in the field of painting, is absolutely worthless.⁹⁷

The literary cannot be understood here in its most provincial definition as a body of texts, poems, allegories, etc. which serve as the source of subject matter for works. Instead, the literary extends to include all the activities of language such that they operate on and tend to dominate the visual with the claim of providing the "meaning" of a work, or even pointing to it. The modernist writers who reinscribed the position of modern art within these terms saw the activity of painting as a kind of manifest destiny of the visual, so that Michel Seuphor, for instance, could intone grandly the inevitability of such progression away from linguistic dependence to visual autonomy: "there had to be a painting wholly liberated from dependence on the figure, the object—a painting which like music does not illustrate anything, does not tell a story, and does not launch a myth."⁹⁸

What becomes anathema in the modern period—to both literary and visual arts—is the idea of representation as a surrogate. Whether among the Russian Futurists, French Cubists or with Mondrian and his Neoplasticism, one prevailing theme is that the making, the very production, of a work is inseparable from its form and from the material in which the work is manifest. The heart of such anathema is the idea of substitution: there should be no "else," no "other" for the work. The terms of this are necessarily different in the visual arts than they are in literature. This is what allows the concept of *presence* to come into its mythic form, conceived of as a plenitude, full and replete, self-sufficient as a state of being in the visual realm. Simultaneously, this also allowed the notion of a pure *absence*, of an always-represented and never-present signified to be conceptualized as the fundamental basis of linguistic and *ergo* literary signification. The figurative, mimetic, and referential are all equated with the literary/linguistic in this conception. Huntley Carter, reviewing some "New Books in Art" for the *Egoist* in 1914 wrote of Kandinsky and Picasso that "both have achieved the final abandonment of all representative intention."⁹⁹

Representation, the notion of a surrogate or substitute term for the actual fact of the work, was what was under attack in the formulation of a purely visual mode. The obvious surrogate, that which had sabotaged the painterly expression from time immemorial, was the word. To retreat beyond its reach, lay claim to a realm which was *unrepresentable*, completely resistant to access or definition or appropriation by language, was a supreme triumph. In its place was substituted the *presentational*, with all its assumed purity, visuality, and self-sufficient evident character. (Thus, red was red, a line was a line, a form a form and the redness, linearity, and formal arrangements were denied any assertive values or symbolic properties which might lead them to refer to anything other than their explicit presence.) Whether this is or is not possible is not what is at stake in this discussion; that the conceptualization of this difference manifested itself in small inklings among the modern artists is what provided the material for later codification of the visual in terms of this distinction by modernist critics and historians.

That the modern artists were concerned with the problem of presence is readily grasped in these discussions of material, and there is a curious but understandable link between this idea and the notion of the present as an immediate and graspable experience. "Everything absent, remote, requiring projection in the veiled weakness of the mind is sentimental. The new vortex . . . accordingly, plunges to the heart of the Present."¹⁰⁰ The banishing of representations, surrogates, and referents is perfectly consistent with the idea of immersion in the present. The fictions with which such ideas are sustained are evident and clichéd—the "innocent eye," the "experience of the real," the "empirical validity of perception," etc.—but that they were operating to refute the authority of any medium but that in which a work was constructed was emblematic of the attitudes motivating the production of these works. There were evident problems with insisting on the self-sufficient autonomy of the visual, as Meyer Schapiro pointed out in retrospect: "What was thought to be a universal language of colors and forms was unintelligible to many when certain conventions were changed."¹⁰¹

But the idea of a readily intelligible and immediate art was a seductive one—and not only in the early period. "Whatever the language, the meaning is 'imminence'; and that 'nowness' is a precondition of the search for newness."¹⁰² Newness, nowness, imminence—all depend on the notion of presence, on its existential possibility as both real and sufficient. The point is not to arbitrate between positions, but to describe their existence within the historical development of attitudes toward art and literature as signifying practices. The problem of presence and ab-

sence, and the characterizations of plenitude and surrogate with which they have been damned and distinguished, return a few decades later in the critical apprehension and historicization of early modern art and with the oppositional definition of literary and visual arts of high modernism at midcentury. For the moment, these concepts serve to contextualize the fundamentally problematic character of typographic experiment in early modernism.

Typography in this period was similarly concerned with its own specificity, its formal means and their investigation, the same language of *faktura*, of materiality, and of self-reflexive formal language. Because the lines of oppositional definition were only hinted at, just beginning to be formed in the discussion of material, typography could be included in a modern art practice. In addition, since materiality and formal elements were not used at the expense of content or subject value, but in relation to them, the identity of formal elements had not taken full precedence over the signifying function of those elements. Again, the insistence on such a distinction came later, in the modernist retrenched investment in an oppositional difference in which the terms of presence and absence were allowed to organize themselves into exclusionary positions, as if one could exist independent of the other and necessarily did so. The precise manner in which typographic experimentation challenged the division between literary absence and visual presence made it unsuited to the critical and historical categories used by midcentury modernists to describe the activities of early modern art. This typographic work embodied and manifested a complex attitude toward the materiality of visual and verbal aspects of signification—one in which there was a continual interplay of reading and seeing, linguistic referential functions and visual phenomenological appearance, as well as traces of social context and historical production evidenced in materiality.