

---

## Francis Picabia: Death and Resurrection of the Artist

**Marcella Lista**

Translator: Simon Pleasance

---

**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1896>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.1896

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

**Publisher**

Groupe d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 April 2003

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

**Electronic reference**

Marcella Lista, « Francis Picabia: Death and Resurrection of the Artist », *Critique d'art* [Online],  
21 | Printemps 2003, Online since 27 February 2012, connection on 22 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1896> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.1896

---

This text was automatically generated on 22 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

---

# Francis Picabia: Death and Resurrection of the Artist

Marcella Lista

Translation : Simon Pleasance

---

## REFERENCES

Jouffroy, Alain. *Picabia*, Paris : Ed. Assouline, 2002, (Mémoire de l'art)

Pierre, Arnauld. *Francis Picabia : la peinture sans aura*, Paris : Gallimard, 2002, (Art et artistes)

Pradel, Jean-Louis. *Francis Picabia : la peinture mise à nu*, Paris : Gallimard, 2002, (Découvertes/Hors série)

*Francis Picabia : singulier idéal*, Paris : Paris-Musées, 2002

- 1 The “re-reading” of Picabia’s œuvre proposed by the City of Paris Museum of Modern Art, 27 years after the last retrospective devoted to this artist at the Grand Palais, in Paris, links up with recent art historical debate on the limits of modernism. With the goal of “permitting a more objective appreciation going beyond a stereotyped part-reading”<sup>1</sup>, the exhibition and its catalogue champion above all a re-balancing of the corpus which, over and above the acquired recognition of works associated with Dada, aims at giving full legitimacy to each of the artist’s stylistic periods, from the Impressionist canvases of his earliest days to the last abstract works, long deemed dubious, by way of the “transparencies”, the “monsters” painted with ripolin, and the eye-catching nudes of the 1940s. This approach is backed up by the contemporary views of a selection of artists, invited to make pronouncements about Picabia’s “topicality”. The “resonance” that thus comes to the fore does not only usher in the demystification of art and the notion of auteur. It plays, on the knife edge, with the suspension of value judgement. But also prompts some prior reflection about the deletion of the value judgement. The publications appearing on this occasion are all informed by the same agreed idea: the

artistic relevance of the person who defined himself as “the underprivileged man of art”; they also seem to encourage us, today more than ever, to regard the figure of the modern artist as a precarious survivor of the fall of God, bartering his last titles with the death of art, but without a great deal of conviction. A typical feature common to them all is the return in force of the biographical approach. The analytical task undertaken by William Camfield’s monograph (published in 1976) and Maria Lluïsa Borràs’ catalogue raisonné (published in 1985), shows a keenness to examine Picabia’s œuvre within the pivotal themes of modernity and its flipside—in the form of the “return” (to “order”, etc.). Contrasted with this, today, is an exploded illumination, where the sole epicentre made visible is the egotistical personality of the artist.

- 2 In its list of contents as in its layout, the catalogue *Francis Picabia : singulier idéal* assumes a dissociation between the œuvre and the critical discourse. The catalogue of the works, commented by Arnauld Pierre, forms a diptych with a succession of eleven brief, unillustrated texts, complemented by artists’ accounts. Gérard Audinet, joint curator of the exhibition, has come down firmly on one side by focusing his essay on the destructive process inherent in Picabia’s method: his habit of repainting on existing canvases. In a general way, the attention of the historians shifts here to the strategies and challenges of an artistic stance doomed to the disappearance of the work. In the galas organized by the high society life and soul of the French Riviera between the wars, Sara Cochran thus recognizes a metaphor of the spectacle and a narcissistic celebration of pleasure which are clearly echoed in contemporary practices interested in the idea of the party. Picabia’s debt to Nietzsche, referred to more than once (in particular by Annie Le Brun and Carole Boulbès), sheds light, furthermore, on the dark side of his character, his tendency to melancholy and depression, and the message resulting from a fundamental disengagement from all manner of utopia. By sticking too closely to it, however, ambivalence and indecisiveness certainly have an effect of contamination, all discourse being in advance referred to a certain inanity. Maria-Lluïsa Borràs points in a way to the pitfall when she expresses surprise at the fact that “of so many painters indebted to the past, it is Picabia who, albeit with the approval of postmodernism, was the one who shifted the interest of his works almost exclusively to their sources”, to such an extent that one tends to overlook “the precious analysis that all artworks merit”. Symptomatic here is the fact that it is William Camfield’s essay, a novel quest in the footsteps of the “religious instinct” in the artist’s work and thought, which introduces the compilation. Independently of the quality of this study, this choice probably contributes to doing away with the taboo concerning a tendency to hagiography, historiographic and museum-related, alike. In 1961, Marcel Duchamp spoke at the Museum of Modern Art to the advocates of Neo-Dada: “I threw my urinal in their face and they made a work of art out of it”. The quip simply took note of a generation gap, as inevitable as it was necessary. But it also gave a voice to the irony of an institutional rehabilitation which no charge of provocation can withstand.
- 3 Arnauld Pierre’s monograph, *Francis Picabia : la peinture sans aura*, published at the same time by Gallimard, issues from a more constructed approach. Adopting a rigorous philological approach, the author here presents the state of knowledge about Picabia’s œuvre, while at the same time constructing, piece by piece, his critical interpretation. On the basis of his previous research, which exhumed the painting’s photographic sources, Arnauld Pierre develops the idea of a regular see-saw movement within the thousand and one successive facets of Picabia’s corpus. On the one hand he rightly highlights the

painter's wrangles with abstraction, which permeates all his work, as a serious game with one of art's last utopias. On the other hand, he reveals the early relationship (starting with the first Impressionist canvases) to secondhand reality formed by the photographic medium and all mechanical imagery, an expression of the disenchantment which undermines the endeavour at its source and alternates canvas with "old layers". This readable and effective access offered to the work brings to the surface not a disappearance of modernity, but rather a modernity which cannily produces its own antibodies, so that it can go on existing.

- 4 Two small monographs published simultaneously summon up—though less comprehensively—the same themes. Alain Jouffroy presents his committed account in the guise of an introduction to the œuvre, while Jean-Louis Pradel makes available to a broad readership an overview whose layout invites a kaleidoscopic reading. What probably remains to be produced is a detailed analytical study which can free itself from the concentric tendencies of biography, by examining what Picabia owed to his own contemporaries, in the context of problems and issues (starting with abstraction), in relation to which it is hard to turn your back on the fact that they are shared.

---

## NOTES

1. Suzanne Pagé, introduction to the catalogue.