
Picabia's 'Caoutchouc' and the Threshold of Abstraction

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In 1946, Wassily Kandinsky's widow and a group of researchers began an enquiry to establish who was responsible for the first abstract painting. One of the artists being investigated was Francis Picabia, and it was for information about his contributions to the development of a truly abstract art that Mme Kandinsky went to see his first wife, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia. The latter thought that the search for such an 'absolute' first was absurd, especially in view of the fact that Picabia 'painted his canvases for himself, seeking to satisfy only his professional and personal requirements, without asking himself if he were the first or the second.'¹

The needs which Picabia wanted to satisfy found their first verbal expression when he was still a youth. An anecdote has it that when he was urged by his grandfather to give up painting – then in an Impressionist style influenced by Pissarro and Sisley – in order to take up photography, he replied: 'You can photograph a landscape, but not the forms which I have in my head.'² By 1907, two years after he had had a highly successful solo exhibition at Paris's prestigious Galerie Haussmann, Picabia was convinced that the artist 'must express the emotion which nature made him feel without the least care for technique.'³ It was convictions like these that caused Picabia to break entirely with the pictorial conventions he had been using, trying instead to create a type of painting which would consist of 'forms and colours delivered from their sensorial attributes – a painting situated in the pure invention which recreates the world of forms according to its own will and its own imagination.'⁴ It was clear he had conceived of the possibility of abstraction, but that he had not as yet achieved it. Yet, from this period, ca. 1908-09, came the works which would later pique the curiosity of

Mme Kandinsky. Chief among them was the small watercolour and gouache composition on cardboard (Fig. 1) that remained untitled until some years later, when Picabia gave it the curious name of *Caoutchouc*, literally 'rubber.'⁵ It appears that the work was entitled at a time when Picabia

1 Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, *Aires abstraites* (Genève: Pierre Cailler, 1957), 27. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the French are the author's.

2 *Ibid.*, 22. Picabia's grandfather, Alphonse Davanne (1824-1912), was a friend of Daguerre and worked with him in chemistry and photography. He conceived of photography as the future victor in the direct rivalry between photography and painting. Davanne and Picabia evidently discussed this often. Buffet-Picabia noted that these talks provoked the young artist's development of a theory in which one could develop a 'living painting' that possessed neither subject matter nor representation, thereby escaping 'photographic automatism' (p. 17 sq.).

3 Francis Picabia (in response to a poll), 'Le paysage contemporain: l'opinion de quelques paysagistes,' *Le Gaulois du dimanche* (9-10 février 1907), 2; quoted and translated by William A. Camfield, *Francis Picabia: His Art, Life and Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 12.

4 Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, 'Picabia, l'inventeur,' *L'Œil*, n° 18 (juin 1956), 32.

5 Buffet-Picabia (1957), 26. There, it is stated that the title came sometime later than the work. Pierre Cabanne and Pierre Restany, in their *L'Avant-garde au XX^e siècle* (Paris: André Balland, 1969), 379, suggested that *Caoutchouc* was named ten years after execution, but there is no evidence for this at all. As for the date of execution itself, some objections have been raised to ca. 1908-09, but all can be put to rest by various comparisons to specifically dated works, second-hand accounts, and so on. For close arguments regarding this date, see Camfield, 30-31, and pl. 38-41; Virginia Spate, *Orphism: The Evolution of Non-figurative Painting in Paris, 1910-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 284-285; and Marc Le Bot, *Francis Picabia et la crise des valeurs figuratives, 1900-1925* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968), 97, and pl. 4-5. Buffet-Picabia's attempts to situate the painting at this early date cannot be read as an attempt to secure precedence in abstract art for her former husband, as Mme Kandinsky was trying to do. Buffet-Picabia's assertion that the search was absurd is reason enough to disallow this possibility, and it may be added that she was one of the first to point out that the work was not fully abstract (see n. 7).

was reconsidering the whole role of titles of works of art. When doing this, he recognized something about *Caoutchouc* that has only recently been acknowledged by art historians.

Caoutchouc, described by some as the first abstract picture ever made⁶ – hence Mmc Kandinsky's interest – seems like a total anomaly in Picabia's career, but it was in fact an attempt to reconcile the artist's aspirations with contemporary aesthetic discoveries. At that time, both Cubism and Fauvism were important recent phenomena, and this little painting understandably possesses elements of both. The bright, even violent, colour and heavy outlines of the foreground objects owe much to the latter, while the former informed the way in which the background is fragmented into geometric planes which are then hatched with a cubist-inspired brushstroke. But in spite of this amalgam of all that was aesthetically revolutionary, the work was not truly abstract at all. It is a capricious variation of a still-life, for which one writer has convincingly indicated a specific antecedent, although the composition is reversed.⁷

Despite the numerous descriptions of *Caoutchouc* as the first abstract picture, the most recent scholarship has acknowledged that certain vestiges of recognizable form betray it as the end of one line of development rather than the beginning of the next. It seems that Picabia himself acknowledged this, for reasons to be discussed

presently. Instead of giving the work a title that was a direct indication of what was depicted, the title was a way of leading *away* from pictorial form to a psychological dimension. As a result, the content of the work is more dependent upon the title and its relationship with the image than upon the image alone.

Between 1909 and 1912 Picabia's paintings had evolved into an odd blend of Fauvism and Neo-Impressionism; yet he maintained his aesthetic rhetoric throughout the period. He interpreted his own need to reproduce 'the emotion which nature made him feel' too literally, by representing external scenery in the hope of inducing a similar emotion in viewers of his painting. By 1912, however, his rhetoric and, above all, his forms had been influenced by the Cubists of the Puteaux group, and he realized that he had to move away from the external to the internal world in order to realize his psychological goals.⁸ As a result, paintings of this period, like *Danses à la Source I* and *II*,⁹ take as their forms the type of geometrized planes common to many Cubist works by other artists, although their subjects are all taken from events in Picabia's personal – that is, psychological – life. The *Danses* paintings, for example, were an attempt to pictorialise the psychic dimension of memory by recapturing the elusive joy of a chance encounter during the Picabias' honeymoon in the mountains of Spain in 1909.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it soon became apparent to Picabia that the vestiges of the visible world in these paintings prevented him from realizing his goal of a pure painting of 'forms and colours delivered from their sensorial attributes.'

He set out to reduce these elements of discernible form, and he made his first visually abstract works in 1913. At that time he was in New York to publicize the Armory Show, and he encountered something which was to affect the next phase of his career and his recognition of the full implications of *Caoutchouc*: he began to think of the role of titles. Presumably this was influenced by two things. First, Picabia had seen Kandinsky's highly significant *Improvisation # 27*,¹¹ which was then acquired by Alfred Stieglitz, under whose influence Picabia did his first series of abstract watercolours. (The title is only descriptive of the work and nothing external to it.) Second, contemporary criticism caused him to reconsider the functions of the titling of works of art. At first, Picabia leaned towards analogies with music, the most abstract of all the arts,¹² but he saw along with one critic that even an entirely visually abstract work, like *Chanson Nègre 1*, could still be

6 A list of such interpretations is given in Camfield, 19, n. 4.

7 Camfield, 20-21 and pl. 39. Buffet-Picabia observed that the work was not fully abstract when she said that it was based on a still-life of oranges upon a table (see the account in *Le Bot*, 97). Still-lives, of course, were very popular with the Cubists.

8 Spate, 304, suggested that this was impressed upon Picabia by Marcel Duchamp, after both were exposed to the theories of Henri Bergson, which were discussed by the members of the Puteaux group to which both artists belonged. Nevertheless, it seems that Picabia was more interested in psychological states than Duchamp. For example, Picabia once said that Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier, n° 2* was the expression of the mood 'produced in the painter's memory by the view of a nude descending a flight of stairs,' as cited in an unsigned article, 'A Post-Cubist's Impressions of New York,' *New York Tribune* (9 March 1913). Since this was not in fact the origin of the work – see Pierre Cabanne, *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp* (Paris: Belfond, 1967), 49-52, 57-59 – it is difficult to see Duchamp as the prime mover in this respect.

9 These are reproduced in Camfield, pl. 56-57.

10 An account of this is in Buffet-Picabia (1957), 28-29.

11 Reproduced in Spate, fig. 246.

12 Such analogies were of course in the air at this time; see Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Du sujet dans la peinture moderne,' *Les soirées de Paris*, n° 1 (février 1912), 2.

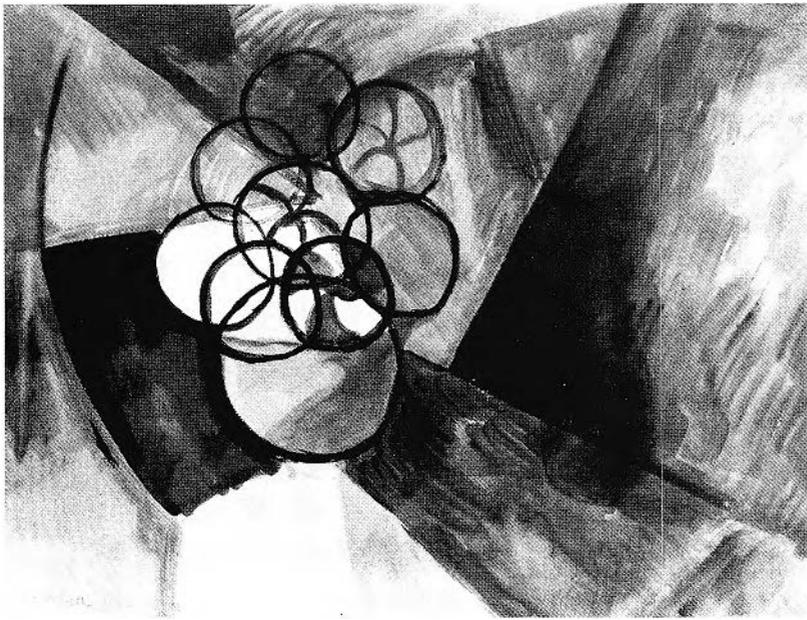


FIGURE 1. Francis Picabia, *Caoutchouc*, ca. 1908-09. Gouache and watercolour on paper, 455 × 615 mm. Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou (Photo: Giraudon, © ADAGP).

described as 'not abstract' by virtue of its title.¹³ To remove this last element of allusion to the objective world, Picabia began to invent intentionally misleading titles. Unfortunately, for reasons which seem to have been beyond the artist's control, the most famous of these works were deciphered quickly. The two huge canvases that Picabia began to work on when he returned to Paris were given the cryptic names *Udnie* and *Edtaonisl*.¹⁴ These works, like the New York watercolours, were entirely visually abstract, but they were based on events that Picabia had remembered – events which he did not want known because they would replace the viewer's own, unique experience of the object.

In June of 1913, Picabia wrote to Stieglitz: 'I am thinking ... of a painting, a purer painting of a dimension having no title, each painting will have a name in rapport with the pictorial expression, [an] appropriate name absolutely created for it.'¹⁵ Unfortunately, the organizers of the exhibition in which these huge works were first seen would not accept this. Doubtless to placate themselves and the public, the organizers added the subtitles *jeune fille américaine (danse)* to *Udnie* and *ecclésiastique* to *Edtaonisl*. These subtitles associated the works to anecdotal accounts concerning a dancer and a prelate – characters that Picabia was said to have watched with interest during his transatlantic journey. The artist immediately deplored these associations, which are now commonly cited as integral to an understanding of the works.¹⁶ He explained to a reporter:

A certain melody by Mendelssohn is entitled 'The Marriage of the Bees.' Let the gods be my witness, nothing in this admirable music ever brought to mind a hornet. It cannot therefore be a matter of an imitative harmony ... However, one accepts its title by tradition and without debating it. Then, for a painting, why not accept a sign which does not evoke accepted conventions? *Udnie* is no more the portrait of a young girl than *Edtaonisl* is the image of a prelate, such as we commonly conceive them. They are memories of America ... representative of an idea, of a nostalgia, of a fugitive impression.¹⁷

Picabia was well aware that the lack of associations by way of title would make the appreciation of his new art a difficult business for the average viewer. He explained to the same reporter that the viewer now required a 'special training of the eye and intellect,' since it was 'not of the popular domain.' In his next few paintings, Picabia went even further into total abstraction. Works like his

¹³ The critic remains anonymous, but his article is far-sighted. See 'History of Modern Art at International Exhibition Illustrated by Paintings and Sculpture,' *New York Times* (23 February 1913).

¹⁴ Reproduced in Camfield, pl. 82 and colour plate vi respectively.

¹⁵ Francis Picabia, unpublished letter to Alfred Stieglitz (16 June 1913; Alfred Stieglitz Archive, Yale University), excerpted in Camfield, 59.

¹⁶ See, for example, Philip Pearlstein, 'The Paintings of Francis Picabia' (M.A. thesis, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1955), 109, and Spate, 381-82. The original account is given in Buffet-Picabia (1956), 35.

¹⁷ 'Ne riez pas, c'est de la peinture et ça représente une jeune américaine,' *Le Matin* (1^{er} décembre 1913); quoted and translated in Camfield, 60.

*Physical Culture*¹⁸ had no anecdotal associations to guide the viewer in understanding. Appreciation and interpretation became individual matters. Art was finally able 'to realize consciously its own nature, which is not to mirror the external world, but to make real, by plastic means, internal mental states.'¹⁹

The execution of *Caoutchouc* marked the beginning of a difficult period for Picabia, a period in which he conceived of abstraction but had as yet not achieved it. The artist finally went beyond this threshold of abstraction when he removed all vestiges of representation in form and title. There are a few strong reasons, then, for asserting that *Caoutchouc* was given its title during the period in which Picabia was considering the role of the title in abstraction – that is, between the summer of 1912 and early 1913.²⁰ First, the artist's works of those months, like the *Danses* paintings, indicate that he was reminiscing a great deal about his early days with Gabrielle during the winter of 1908-09, the time at which *Caoutchouc* was painted. Then, he realized before long that the *Danses*, like *Caoutchouc*, were not fully abstract, and he began an examination of the role of the title. The third reason allows us to understand precisely why Picabia chose the word *Caoutchouc* to describe what he saw as a painting representing the period of search that followed its creation, that is, a painting that marked the end of the line of aesthetic development that still involved the world of visible forms. Early in 1912, Picabia encountered the word *caoutchouc* used symbolically to describe precisely what his own little painting was – the end of its line.

Sometime between 11 May and 5 June 1912, Picabia went with Marcel Duchamp and Guillaume Apollinaire to see the stage version of

Raymond Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique* at the Théâtre Antoine in Paris.²¹ In this play, as well as in the original novel, a position of prominence was given to the image of a *caoutchouc caduc* (a decaying rubber tree) which was the symbol of a dead African king, Yaour ix. This king and his rival, the Emperor Talou, were the descendants of the two children of an ancestral African emperor and Spanish twins who had been shipwrecked on the Ivory Coast. To determine which of his two sons would be the heir to his throne, the ancestral emperor planted a rubber tree for one and a palm for the other, with the first to bloom, which turned out to be the palm, determining his rightful heir. The loser was given the small kingdom of Drelshkaf to appease his jealousy, but the inevitable rivalry occurred, with each branch of the family trying to wrest control of the full empire from the other. To avoid digressing into the full history of these events, it suffices to say that with the generation of Yaour ix, the rivalry came to an end. Talou defeated Yaour in pitched combat, killing him with a poisoned arrow which remarkably preserved his flesh. This allowed Talou to humiliate the memory of the other branch at his coronation as full emperor, holding sway over Drelshkaf as well, by displaying the corpse of his relative next to the rubber tree, which was by this time in an advanced state of decay. Since Yaour died without heirs, this tree became a symbol of the final extinction of his line.²²

Picabia evidently had a similar symbolic meaning in mind when he (retroactively) called his little painting *Caoutchouc*. It was the nearest to complete abstraction of all the works executed during an early period of experimentation and improvisation. Since it only reached the 'threshold of abstraction' without, however, fully crossing it, the painting represented the end of the line of aesthetic development involving the visible world, even though many works done after it were equally or more representational in nature. Since his paintings of 1912, like the *Danses* mentioned above, were probably done after June (see n. 20), and thus after Picabia saw *Impressions d'Afrique*, and since they were exclusively concerned with events that occurred around the time *Caoutchouc* was painted, it is probable that he also remembered the small gouache clearly and looked upon it with fondness. Two other things may have reinforced Picabia's memory of the symbolism of the *caoutchouc caduc* during the time between the Théâtre Antoine performance and the first

¹⁸ Reproduced in Camfield, pl. 86.

¹⁹ Picabia was quoted to this effect by Hutchins Hapgood, 'A Paris Painter,' *New York Globe & Commercial Advertiser* (20 February 1913).

²⁰ The *Danses* paintings were very likely done after June of 1912, since that was the date of the 1912 *Salon* of the Société normande de peinture moderne, in which Picabia exhibited less highly-developed works (cf. Spate, 292, and Camfield, 31, n. 35).

²¹ This was a reprise performance, for the original run, at the Théâtre Fémina aux Champs-Élysées, was in September 1911. See John Ashbery, 'Les versions scéniques d'*Impressions d'Afrique* et de *Locus Solus*,' *Bizarre*, n^{os} 34-35 (1964), 20. Picabia did not know the other men at the time of the first run; see Cabanne, 33.

²² This summary from Raymond Roussel, *Impressions of Africa*, trans. L. Foord & R. Heppenstall (London: Calder & Boyers, 1966), 169-173 and 278-288, the original French edition being published Paris: Leimerc, 1910.

months of 1913, when the artist was giving full consideration to the roles of titles. First, since Picabia was of Spanish descent, and since his summer was spent reminiscing about his honeymoon in Spain, he probably felt a deep affinity for the ancestral Spanish twins that gave birth to Roussel's rival clans.²³ Second, the image of the corpse and withered tree was featured on a publicity flyer released especially for the Théâtre Antoine performance of *Impressions d'Afrique*.²⁴

It appears that Picabia's period on the threshold of abstraction was framed by the painting of *Caoutchouc* in ca. 1908-09 and the bestowal of its title in 1912-13.²⁵ Thus, this diminutive work functions in the context of Picabia's own work in a twofold manner. In its formal properties, it stands on the threshold between the allusion to visible reality on the one hand and abstraction from that reality on the other, a threshold that occupied the next five

years of his career. Beyond its formal properties are those accruing because of its title: like *Udnie* and *Edtaomisl*, it was given for its associative value to the artist alone, and has escaped interpretation until now. As a result, much of *Caoutchouc*'s content lies in Picabia's recognition of its significance in the development of his 'personal and professional requirements.' The content with which it was invested at the outset became a function of that which Picabia bestowed upon it when he finally did cross the threshold of abstraction.

23 Buffet-Picabia (1957), 17, 28-29 and 37, gives frequent testimony to the strength of Picabia's emotional ties to Spain.

24 Reproduced in Ashbery, between 48-49.

25 This second set of dates must remain hypothetical for the time being. *Caoutchouc* was not exhibited until the *Exposition Francis Picabia*, 9-31 décembre 1930 (Léonce Rosenberg, Paris), n° 4. On the other hand, this does not preclude the possibility that the work was stored away and almost forgotten, as were *Udnie* and *Edtaomisl*.

RÉSUMÉ

Des recherches récentes concernant la vie et les œuvres de Francis Picabia ont suscité bien des interprétations sur le sens des titres énigmatiques que l'artiste a donnés aux tableaux de sa période abstraite. Si l'on se penche en particulier sur une œuvre antérieure à cette période, le tout petit *Caoutchouc*, qui ne fut cependant titré que quelques années plus tard, on découvre que l'artiste se préoccupait beaucoup des rapports entre le titre et l'œuvre, en tenant compte que sa démarche comportait de moins en moins de références aux réalités autres que picturales. Plus tard, dans sa réflexion sur l'abstraction, Picabia reconnut que son petit *Caoutchouc* appartenait encore au monde de la figuration auquel il avait maintenant renoncé. Empruntant un concept aux *Impressions d'Afrique* de Raymond Roussel, il donna alors à ce tableau le titre *Caoutchouc*, révélant ainsi à la fois la place de cette œuvre dans son évolution vers l'abstraction et son attitude à l'égard du public quant à la manière de recevoir ses futures œuvres abstraites.
