Total Expansion of the Letter

OCTOBER Books

Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs, edited by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism, edited by Douglas Crimp

Aberrations: An Essay on the Legend of Forms, by Jurgis Baltrušaitis

Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille, by Denis Hollier

Painting as Model, by Yve-Alain Bois

The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents, edited by Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk

The Woman in Question, edited by Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie

Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century, by Jonathan Crary

The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition: Essays toward the Release of Shakespeare's Will, by Joel Fineman

Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture, by Slavoj Žižek

Cinema, Censorship, and the State: The Writings of Nagisa Oshima, by Nagisa Oshima

The Optical Unconscious, by Rosalind E. Krauss

Gesture and Speech, by André Leroi-Gourhan

Compulsive Beauty, by Hal Foster

Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris, by Robert Morris

Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists, by Joan Copjec

Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture, by Kristin Ross

Kant after Duchamp, by Thierry de Duve

The Duchamp Effect, edited by Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon

The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century, by Hal Foster

October: The Second Decade, 1986–1996, edited by Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, Denis Hollier, and Silvia Kolbowski

Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910–1941, by David Joselit

Caravaggio's Secrets, by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit

Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843–1875, by Carol Armstrong

Bachelors, by Rosalind Krauss

Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975, by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture, by Jonathan Crary

Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages, by Ed Ruscha

Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents, edited by Tom McDonough

Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde, by Branden W. Joseph

Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001, by Martha Rosler

Prosthetic Gods, by Hal Foster

Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art, by Mignon Nixon

Women Artists at the Millennium, edited by Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher

"The Beautiful Language of My Century": Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945–1968, by Tom McDonough

The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris, by George Baker

Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s, by Carrie Lambert-Beatty

Robert Ryman: Used Paint, by Suzanne P. Hudson

Hall of Mirrors: Roy Lichtenstein and the Face of Painting in the 1960s, by Graham Bader

Perpetual Inventory, by Rosalind E. Krauss

The Absence of Work: Marcel Broodthaers, 1964–1976, by Rachel Haidu

The Filming of Modern Life: European Avant-Garde Film of the 1920s, by Malcolm Turvey

Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch, by Anthony White

Looking for Bruce Conner, by Kevin Hatch

Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature, by Devin Fore

Critical Laboratory: The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn, by Thomas Hirschhorn

Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art, by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

On the Eve of the Future: Selected Writings on Film, by Annette Michelson

Toward Fewer Images: The Work of Alexander Kluge, by Philipp Ekardt

The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art, by Éric Michaud

Total Expansion of the Letter: Avant-Garde Art and Language after Mallarmé, by Trevor Stark

Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization, by David Joselit

The Long Front of Culture: The Independent Group and Exhibition Design, by Kevin Lotery

Total Expansion of the Letter

Avant-Garde Art and Language after Mallarmé

Trevor Stark

An OCTOBER Book

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

This book was set in Bembo Book MT Pro by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stark, Trevor, author.
Title: Total expansion of the letter : avant-garde art and language after Mallarmé / Trevor Stark.
Other titles: Total expansion of the letter (M.I.T. Press)
Description: Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2020. | Series: October books | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019026072 | ISBN 9780262043717 (hardcover)
Subjects: LCSH: Art--Language. | Mallarmé, Stéphane, 1842-1898--Criticism and interpretation. | Chance in art. | Arts--Experimental methods.
Classification: LCC N72.L36 S73 2020 | DDC 700--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019026072

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Annie, always

Contents

Introduction

In the Interregnum: Mallarmé and the Avant-Gardes

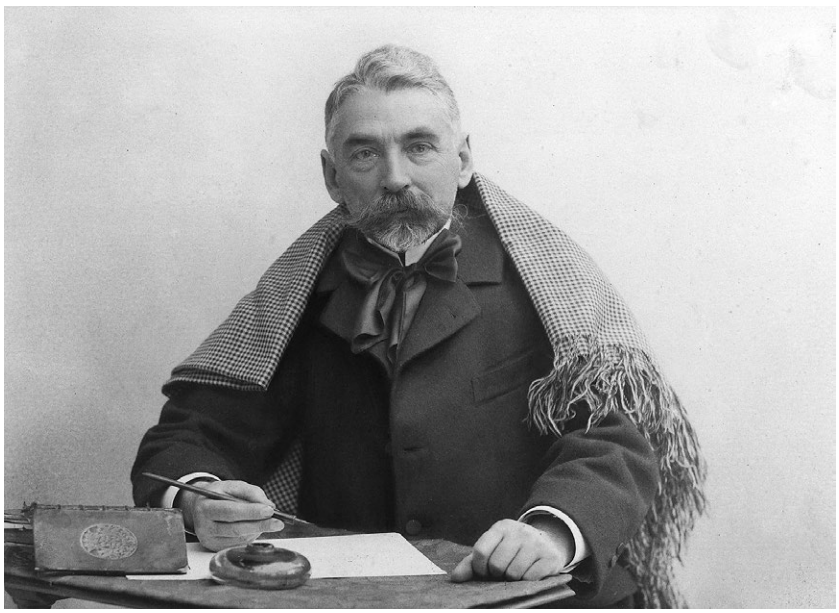

Figure 0.1 Paul Nadar, Stéphane Mallarmé with a Shawl, 1895.

What reading public, if any, could be expected by a writer rigorously opposed to communication? The French poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) confronted this question in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as a problem of poetic principle and also as a recurrent critical complaint (figure 0.1). His obituary in the popular French daily newspaper *Le Gaulois* in 1898 answered it bluntly: Mallarmé was the "absolutely incomprehensible" leader of a "school of unintelligibility," a marginal cult of poets apparently devoted to "obscurity."[1]

No less an authority than Leo Tolstoy had charged Mallarmé with the same offense when interviewed by *Le Gaulois* two years prior. The Russian realist excoriated a harmful tendency among young French authors to "torture" their words as well as their readers, and complained: "Do they not feel that your language, so beautiful, so noble, so pure, is sufficient?"[2] To illustrate his point, Tolstoy asked the reporter to read aloud a poem recently published in a Russian review: Mallarmé's first fully unpunctuated poem, "M'introduire dans ton histoire …" ("To introduce myself into your story …") (1886). Tolstoy protested: "I'd very much like to know what this author meant. There are beautiful rhymes—'*attentatoire* and *territoire*'—but I've understood nothing. … Do you understand the meaning? Me, not at all. Not a period, not a comma." A year later, Tolstoy delivered his final verdict in his treatise *What is Art?* (1897) by citing Mallarmé's late sonnet "À la nue accablante tu" as an example of a poem "deprived of all sense" and with "no meaning whatever."[3]

Mallarmé penned responses to both of Tolstoy's attacks, neither of which helped his case very much. First, to *Le Gaulois*, he sent a statement respectfully differentiating Tolstoy's "ample and simple genius, direct in the expression of the idea" from his own poetic principle: "Do you not see that we are working to reinforce absolute language, instead of making, at our risk and peril, individual experiences, seeking, if it were possible, to authenticate them?" (The editors couldn't help but add to this "curious note" their exasperated commentary, "But why the devil does he write in such a way that we can't understand him?")[4] To the French translator of

What is Art? in June 1898, Mallarmé addressed a bizarre statement opposing Tolstoy's "essentially communicative" theory of language with his own countermodel, in which the poem would be "disseminated *to whomever* [*à qui veut*] but, first, as a result of a withdrawal or isolation."[5] Against what Tolstoy deemed the "sufficiency" of the French language, Mallarmé sought an "absolute" that would call into question language's capacity to represent either "individual experiences" or "the idea." Against the presumed transparency of communication achieved in the realist novel, Mallarmé described a condition in which the poet would address a hypothetical and unknowable public that might or might not emerge in some uncertain future, all the while revoking the possibility of understanding in the present.

With these obscure polemics, we are already embroiled in the questions that occupied Mallarmé's life, and will occupy us over the course of this book: What would it mean to locate the "absolute" of language precisely where communication falters and fails? And, to reiterate the book's initial question, whom did Mallarmé seek to address with such dysfunctional words? What models of reception and of temporality were implied by the assertion that a poem's dissemination would occur "as a result of a withdrawal"? Did this amount to an admission of the writer's resignation, defeat, or even death? This final possibility was a constant threat in Mallarmé's life, as he freely admitted to a journalist who wanted a quote about contemporary literary movements: "For me, the case of the poet in this society that does not permit him to live is the case of a person who isolates himself to sculpt his own grave."[6]

However desperate or senseless these questions appeared to many readers in Mallarmé's day, oscillating as they did between totalizing ambition and resigned self-effacement, they would gain dramatically in relevance with just a few years of hindsight. For, as a matter of historical fact, Mallarmé's address "to whomever" was taken up as a living project by any number of artists and poets of the European avant-gardes immediately following the poet's death. Even his oblique response to *What is Art?*, when it appeared in

print in February 1899, found a recipient: it struck the nineteen-year-old poet and future partisan for cubism Guillaume Apollinaire to such a degree that he scrupulously transcribed it on an envelope, and kept it among his papers until his death (figure 0.2).[7] Mallarmé's words might have been all the more poignant to Apollinaire because the elder poet had definitively withdrawn only five months prior, succumbing with supreme irony to a spasm of the larynx at age 56.

Within avant-garde artistic circles, from the birth of cubism to the diffusion of Dada, Mallarmé became the subject of intense identifications, rapidly proliferating readings and misreadings, and acrimonious internecine debate—a process intensified with the posthumous publication of his notorious "visual poem" *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard* (*A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance*) in 1914.[8] Over the course of this book, I will take up this process of reception in the twentieth-century avant-gardes, their claims of influence, and their disavowals thereof. But I will do so with a specifically art-historical problem in mind: simultaneous with the development of abstraction in art, as the avant-gardes anxiously or exultantly confronted the perceived collapse of the traditions and codes of visual representation, artists became increasingly preoccupied with language, both as a material and as a metaphor.[9] On the one hand, words literally became a medium for artists, from the newsprint headlines and stencils that began to invade the surfaces of cubist collage to the experiments with the "plasticity" and sonority of the letter in Dada typography and performance (see, for example, figures 1.19 and 3.3).[10] On the other hand, many artists and theorists of the avant-garde began to assert that the visual arts, no longer bound to verisimilitude, would begin to function like language—that is, as a system of meaning both held in common and riven with fractures, both rigidly socially determined and subject to constant change, both structured and arbitrary. This book's central argument is that these artistic developments were entwined with the historical ascendancy across the long nineteenth century of a project to distinguish language as such from its referential function—a project pursued in aesthetics,

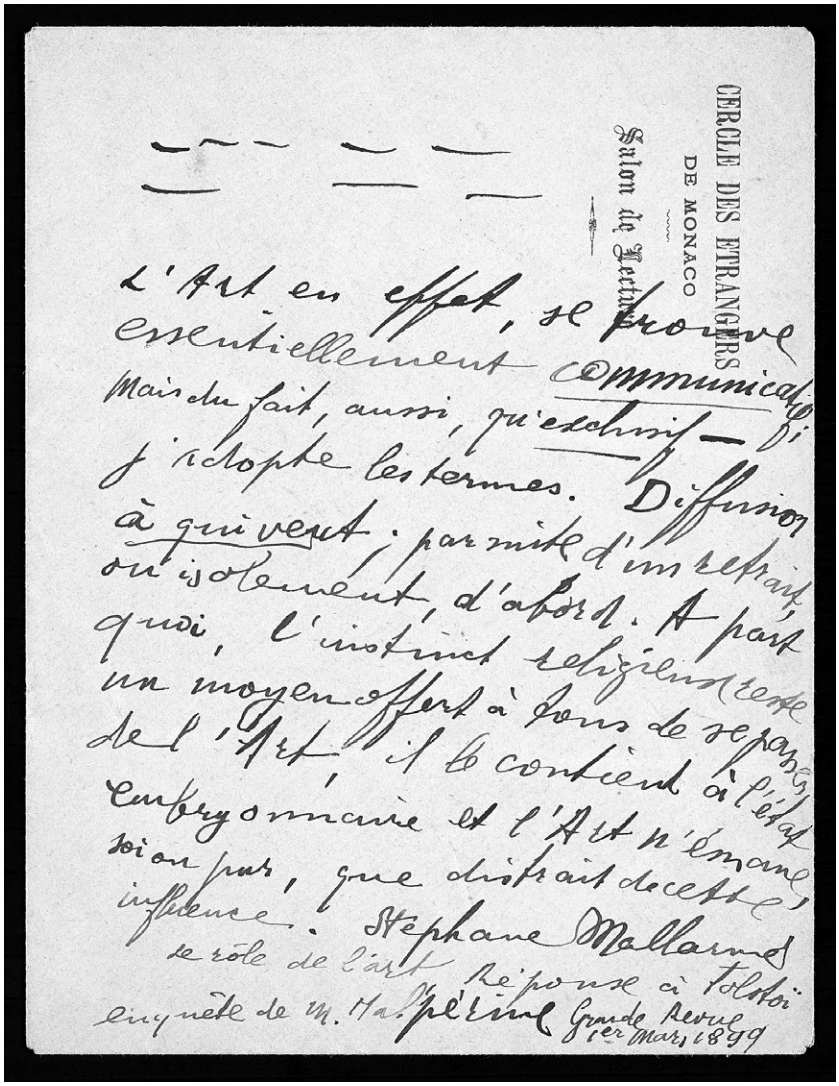

Figure 0.2 Guillaume Apollinaire, "Transcription of Stéphane Mallarmé's Response to an Enquête on Tolstoy," 1899. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (880268).

philosophy, and linguistics. In the work of Mallarmé, its foremost poetic harbinger, the cubists and Dadaists encountered a theory of language and an aesthetic practice within language devoted to the shared contingency of the word and the world.

Following a spiritual and aesthetic crisis in the mid-1860s, when he was still in his twenties, Mallarmé proclaimed that he had discovered "the Void, which is truth," and thereby perceived in horrible negative "the intimate correlation of Poetry with the Universe."[11] As he saw it, language was the ground securing the existence of human sociability and community as such; and yet it was also fundamentally groundless, a structure of arbitrary marks and empty sounds imputed with meaning only through the aleatory flux of social convention. However, his denial of a positive foundation to language and, by implication, to the universe and all human aspirations within it, did not lead Mallarmé to scorn poetry. Conversely, it nourished a utopian hope that modern poetry's historical task might be to construct aesthetic forms appropriate to this vacated ontological and linguistic condition: a new poetry for a democratic republic governed by an anonymous "Crowd" rather than ruled by individuals, and a new ritual oriented to chance and the "Void" rather than to any personal God. However, facing the seemingly infinite deferral of this future, Mallarmé alternated painfully between a dream of expansion and a reality of depletion, between an impossible definition of poetry as the "orphic explanation of the world" and the production of mere "meaningless sonnets."[12]

This book's title, *Total Expansion of the Letter*, is drawn from a "critical poem" of Mallarmé's entitled "The Book, Intellectual Instrument," first published in the modernist literary journal *La Revue blanche* in June 1895 and widely disseminated in his 1896 prose collection *Divagations*.[13] There, he pronounced: "The book, total expansion of the letter, should derive from it directly a spacious mobility, and by correspondences institute a play of elements that confirms the fiction."[14] Mallarmé used the phrase in question to describe a limitless extension of the traditional purview and capacities of writing—to the point that he could assert: "everything in the

world exists to end up in a book"—but one entailing, or even dependent upon, a reduction of language to "a nothing, acute and ingenuous," to the equivalent of silence or noise.[15] It also describes a dialectic operative within a range of modern artistic practices, in which language seemed to encroach into previously nonlinguistic terrain, but at the cost of its fragmentation, nullification, or reduction to the smallest noncommunicative particle (the fragile autonomy of the letter in Dada, for example). Poetic language, in short, could become everything only by becoming nothing, inverting Marx's revolutionary maxim "I am nothing and I must become everything."[16] This dynamic was a motive force within Mallarmé's thought and, this book will argue, described a crucial condition of avant-garde art's first "linguistic turn," in cubism and Dada. "Total Expansion of the Letter" thus stands for a problem: Why did language became a pervasive object for avant-garde art only on the condition of becoming dysfunctional and incommunicative?

In what follows, I will offer a reciprocal interpretation of Mallarmé and of avant-garde art, in approximately equal measure. No great historical or cultural gaps had to be bridged for the cubists and Dadaists to read Mallarmé: among other things, Mallarmé had been a friend and collaborator of Édouard Manet, a subject for Claude Debussy, a defender of impressionism, a link between the poetic generations of Paul Verlaine and Paul Valéry, and, as we have seen, a frequent target for mockery in the popular press. Further, by the time of his death in 1898, Mallarmé had been claimed by successive waves of *fin-de-siècle* movements, whether the symbolists, *vers libristes*, Nabis, or various *wagnériste* sects. The cubists and Dadaists in the decades following, then, did not retrieve Mallarmé from obscurity, but rather entered into an already fraught contest of interpretations, seeking to differentiate, and in some ways to invent, their own Mallarmé for their own new purposes. These later avant-gardes—as they never tired of insisting—discovered dimensions of the poet's work to which his greatest supporters among the impressionist and symbolist generations remained "oblivious," as the cubists' first dealer and great early theoretician

Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler put it.[17] "Mallarmé, like Cézanne," Kahnweiler claimed, "was not understood until after 1900."[18] For the Futurist Gino Severini, likewise, writing about cubism in 1916, "the plastic work corresponding to the poetic work of Mallarmé exists only today," for "The Impressionists barely stammered the new language of which Mallarmé alone began to conceive the architecture."[19] For all their evident generational angling, these statements suggest the historical paradox that the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes did not recover a stable set of meanings with the name "Mallarmé," but rather constructed them as though for the first time in posthumous dialogue with the poet. As the cubists and Dadaists formed themselves, they came to recognize their own preoccupations in Mallarmé, preoccupations that would have been unfamiliar to the poet's contemporaries: namely, the ubiquity of chance, the indeterminacy of reception, the constraint of aesthetics under capitalism, and the sheer visual or sonic force of linguistic matter.

Just as certain aspects of Mallarmé's poetics became legible only in his posthumous reception, *Total Expansion of the Letter* contends, reciprocally, that Mallarmé's theory of language—or, better, his experience of language, his work within language—can illuminate anew certain fundamental problems of the avant-garde. It is the least of his merits that Mallarmé provided a model of self-reflexivity fundamentally at odds with the latter-day modernist commitment to circumscribing and "entrenching" each artistic medium within its own "area of competence" (a project with rather few adherents today).[20] When "the act of writing was scrutinized down to its origins" in his poetry, Mallarmé discovered no solid ground, no essence, and no positive quality to define his medium. Instead, he faced the unsettling fact that "writing itself is out of place [*s'il y a lieu d'écrire*]."[21] That is, the more rigorously one turned inward to an analysis of the structures of linguistic expression, Mallarmé realized, the more one found oneself propelled outward and "out of place" by the contingencies of history, of society, and even of the universe itself. The core of his project, in other words, was a reflection on the heteronomous determinations of

aesthetic autonomy or the social character of asocial communication. As we shall see, Mallarmé determined that his very commitment to "absolute language" would force poetry into transformative dialogue with adjacent or far-flung cultural practices, from dance to fashion, from painting to finance, from journalism to theater, from civic and religious ritual to the tax code. Following Mallarmé, this book will argue, language functioned in avant-garde art as a substrate for intermediality, just as decisive as the encounter with media technologies such as photography and film.

Mallarmé's question "Does something like Letters exist?"[22] delivered the poet into a zone of indeterminacy between mediums, social practices, and temporalities—a paradox that will reverberate through each of this book's case studies in the history of the avant-garde. In the book's first two chapters, we will ask, with Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, whether the cubist dream of rendering painting into a form of writing would expand art's terrain to the popular vernacular of advertisements and newspapers, or condemn visual representation to arbitrariness and aphasia. In the third chapter, we will inquire, with Tristan Tzara and Hugo Ball in wartime Zurich, whether Dada's shattering of syntax and grammar would lead, as Ball hoped, to the "inmost alchemy" of language or to a cacophonic *Gesamtkunstwerk* mimicking the "horror of [their] time."[23] And, finally, with Marcel Duchamp, we will consider whether his investigations into chance would result in a Mallarméan language "liberated" from "ideal meaning" or lead straight to the aleatory spaces of the casino and the bond markets.[24]

Accounting for these cases will involve working across the divisions of method that for decades structured the study of the avant-gardes, most notably the split between social art history and semiology or formalism.[25] The polarization is artificial—and always was, in the best work from either camp—and neither, conceived in isolation from its putative antipode, is capable of accounting for the dialectical position defended by Mallarmé in a lecture given at Oxford in 1894: "Everything is summed up between Aesthetics and Political Economy."[26] However, this "between" in the history of the avant-garde, as I have tried to conceive it, will be short on

redemption, whether social or semiotic: I will not argue, for example, that the various appropriations of mass-cultural language in cubist collage or in Dada performance constitute anything like an effective opposition to capital or social hierarchy; nor will I propose that the poem or work of art could effectively model the structural functioning of a "language-state" as described in what were once known as the "human sciences."[27] Rather, *Total Expansion of the Letter* tracks the forms of "restricted action" (to borrow one of Mallarmé's titles) invented within language by a self-marginalizing sector of the European bourgeoisie (the avant-garde, in other words) as they confronted the contradictions and crises augured by their own class's ascendancy.

In the art-historical imagination, the exceptional moments of conjunction between artistic and political revolution (for example, in Soviet Constructivism or Dada's participation in the *Spartakus* uprising and the fight against fascism) can overshadow the generalized social dialectic that determined the rise of the European avant-gardes in the age of capital. As the inseparable halves of a single historical process, the avant-gardes faced the seemingly boundless triumph of capitalism and the self-destruction of the bourgeoisie's own mythic *promesses de bonheur*. Capital's utopian promise that every object, relationship, quality, or form of life could be translated without loss into the commodity's universally legible language of value remade not only the relations of production and exchange, but of representation and communication. The avant-garde uneasily inhabited the contradiction between the absorption of the social world into the economic sphere and the bourgeoisie's forms of cultural legitimization, chief among them the preservation of an enlightened and democratic public sphere for art and letters. The ambivalence felt by the avant-gardes regarding the place of art in a world optimized for market exchange can be glimpsed, for example, in the slogan that announced the First International Dada Fair, "The Dada Movement leads to the Sublation of the Art Trade"; or, more modestly, in Kahnweiler's feeling that, as a matter of principle, his dual activities as an art theorist and dealer should be kept rigorously separate,

which meant, in practice, that he wrote only when the market collapsed, and when business was good, he remained "silent."[28]

Mallarmé experienced these conditions as a breakdown in aesthetic sociability: a collapse of the institutional, linguistic, and visual forms that had once secured continuity with the traditions of the past and posterity in the future, which now left the present stranded. "In an unstable society, lacking unity," he argued, "no stable and definitive art can be created."[29] Yet the constant upheavals of capitalist modernity, Mallarmé perceived, had progressively installed a new universality, that of the market. Language itself was being remade into a system of "universal reporting," as he called it, a form of transactional and reified communication, in which it would "suffice, perhaps, in order to exchange human thought, to take or to put into someone else's hand in silence a coin."[30]

The symptoms of this ascendant model of language as a medium of exchange between atomized subjects could be observed in poetry, where, Mallarmé noted, "An unexplained need for individuality arises."[31] Mallarmé saw this aesthetic individualism epitomized in a younger generation of poets directly inspired by his example: the *vers libristes* of the 1880s, such as René Ghil and Gustave Kahn, who sought to cast off the strictures of meter and verse as historically and aesthetically obsolete. Despite the variety of poetic and scientific justifications advanced for these new post-symbolist free-verse forms (within which Mallarmé's own work featured prominently), the social imaginary shared by this generation, Mallarmé felt, was one in which "each poet goes into his own corner to play, on a flute very much his own, whatever tune he wishes."[32]

Poetic structures appropriate to the present, however, would be found neither in individualistic communication—which would lead to a proliferation of incompatible styles mimetically tied to a shattered society—nor in a conservative hope for return to the collective forms of the past. Rather, to a perplexed literary public, Mallarmé advanced the cause of depersonalization as the appropriate "attitude of the poet in a period such as this one, where he is on strike before society."[33] Against the reigning conception of

language as a channel for autonomous agents to conduct quasi-economic exchanges of information, Mallarmé proposed an "impersonified" language that would retreat from both author and reader alike, seeming to "take place all by itself."[34] As in a strike, he imagined that this "withdrawal" could dialectically give form to a vision of the collectivity, to the "Mystery" of "the Crowd … stripped of all personality, for it is based on our multiplicity," which is to say, of human variability in its generic and universal form.[35]

No thinker of modern aesthetics was better attuned than Theodor Adorno to the contradictions of this model. He described the aspiration in avant-garde culture for art to "divest itself of its subjectivity," and warned that this might only "raise powerlessness to the level of a program."[36] He cited Mallarmé as the first modern artist—in a lineage he traced across poetry, visual art, and music to Valéry, Picasso, and Karlheinz Stockhausen—who, facing a fractured social order in which even communication had become commodified, refused the individualism of "subjective imagination" and sought to "tame the threatening heteronomy by integrating it" through increasingly impersonal methods of production. This model, however, was not without its risks. "Whether or not this dates back to Mallarmé," Adorno wrote, "it remains to be decided if the subject proves its aesthetic power by remaining in self-control even while abandoning itself to heteronomy, or if by this balancing act the subject ratifies its self-abdication."[37]

This is the political and aesthetic problem, articulated in its paradigmatic form by Mallarmé, to which this book will return in each of its chapters: in the cubist reduction of the visible world to a monochromatic linear framework, in Picasso's production of multiple collages from a single newspaper sheet, in Dada's submergence of the individual voice in a "simultaneous" barrage of collective noise, and in Duchamp's deployment of chance against inherited models of artistic skill. Seeking resistant values upon which to stake art's independence and autonomy (the negation of instrumental communication, the destruction of tradition, and the

critique of freely expressive individuality), the tactics that the avant-gardes put forward ended up mimicking ever more precisely the social dislocations imposed by capital (the reign of fragmentation and abstraction, the enforcement of novelty, and the determination of subjectivity by productive relations as arbitrary as they are objective).

Total Expansion of the Letter, however, will not conceive the relationship between Mallarmé and the twentieth-century avant-gardes as a straightforward reception history, whether construed vertically, as the search for a source, or horizontally, as the construction of a context. Even (or perhaps especially) in the instances of the most sustained and sophisticated artistic reflection on Mallarmé's work, the historian faces a situation in which the linearity and continuity of aesthetic reception can no longer be assumed—for this was the presupposition most directly challenged by the figures in question. Indeed, I will argue that the cubists and Dadaists turned to Mallarmé as a means to grapple with their own social and semiotic disjunction, their awareness that access to the traditions of the past was no longer organically imbedded in their chosen mediums, that communication in the present was destined to failure, and that posterity was ultimately a matter of chance.[38] Such was the sense of emergency communicated by Kahnweiler, writing in despair of the cubist era: "In a normal, untroubled civilization, the spectator can always 'read' the art of his time and recognize the outer world herein. … It is only our own period which has fallen behind in its ability to read."[39]

The historiographical challenge ahead will be to provide a genealogy of the so-called "historical avant-gardes" without simply displacing their point of origin backward in time along a temporal axis that remains resolutely progressivist (the very term "historical avant-garde" establishes a vanguardist orientation toward the future at a singular point of departure in the past).[40] Instead, this book will seek to rethink the "historical" dimension of the first avant-gardes of the century as defined temporally by both belatedness (a sense of art's living on after having missed the moment to realize itself, to paraphrase Adorno)[41] and anxious anticipation (of the

reconciliation of art's social contradictions in some impossible future). For this book, as for the avant-gardes themselves, Mallarmé will be both object and resource, as his writing itself constituted a sustained attempt to develop a model of aesthetic reception appropriate to modernity—one based, in other words, on withdrawal, deferral, and a resolutely nonlinear and indeterminate temporality.

The specific connotation of the name "Mallarmé" for the cubists of Kahnweiler's Montmartre gallery, most notably Picasso and Braque, hinged precisely on questions of reception—as evinced, at the beginning of this introduction, by their close compatriot Apollinaire's interest in Mallarmé's letter to Tolstoy. For this group, Mallarmé had exposed a potentially disquieting link between the modernist investigation of the nature of signification and the newly discontinuous nature of reception, in which scandal or failure in the present constituted a necessary step toward an aesthetic legitimization that would take effect only retroactively or posthumously, if at all.[42] Facing this condition, some, like Kahnweiler, saw in Mallarmé's example a promise of reconciliation: "If the cubists had the courage to [create new signs], the conviction that these signs would be 'read' in the end was thanks to Mallarmé."[43] This conviction, even in its optimism, tacitly admitted the uncertain temporality identified by Mallarmé between the production of the new and the recognition of posterity, which he compared to the contingency of language itself. Whether the writer and reader recognize it or not, Mallarmé insisted, writing is always marked by a delay or deferral between the graphic sign's materiality and its meaning.

In the early years of cubism, Maurice Raynal remembers Mallarmé's poetry stacked in Picasso's studio at the Bateau-Lavoir next to Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Sherlock Holmes stories.[44] And the most intimate members of his social world (Kahnweiler, Apollinaire, and Max Jacob, for example) were certainly among the best-informed in Paris about the latest tendencies in poetic extremism. Yet he and Braque were notoriously guarded about their reading habits, no doubt careful to avoid the perception that cubism, like symbolism, was a movement led by writers.[45] One significant

exception to this silence was later offered by Braque, who cited Mallarmé to describe cubism as a lacuna within aesthetic perception. He described his cubist paintings with reference to Mallarmé's sonnet "Une dentelle s'abolit …" ("Lace abolishes itself …") (1887) and its crucial assonant lines, "Mais, chez qui du rêve se dore / Tristement dort une mandore / Au creux néant musicien" (But for one gilded by his dreams / There sadly sleeps a mandora / With the hollow void musician).[46] With reference to this poem, Braque surmised, "The point of departure is the void [*le néant*], a harmony where speech extends further, has a sense. When we arrive in this intellectual void, this 'hollow void musician,' as Mallarmé wrote, then we have entered into Painting."[47] Echoing Mallarmé's notion of a form of "dissemination *to whomever*" that would "result" from "withdrawal," Braque went on to suggest that the "point of departure" for both speech and painting was an "intellectual void." These suggestive phrases have been convincingly linked by Jean-François Chevrier to the title of Braque's painting *La Mandore* (*Mandora*) (1909–1910; figure 0.3), in which no depicted musician plays the instrument that nevertheless harmonizes between figure and ground by subjecting each to an equal force of "rhythmization," anchored by the "hollow void" of the central faceted sound hole.[48]

Mallarmé's sonnet also carried a message about reception. Its first stanza analogized poetry to an "eternal absence," like finely crafted "lace abolish[ing] itself / in the doubt of the supreme Game." "Like a blasphemy," he continued, the poet has arranged words according to their sonic and syllabic structure, gripped by the conviction that something "filially could have been born" from the "hollow void" of language.[49] These cryptic verses present a central Mallarméan "doubt": the sense that aesthetic creation ("the supreme Game") might amount to no more than the empty act of birthing a "void," an act all the more "blasphemous" for the artist's or poet's pretension to have organized their own "filial" immortality through it. The shattered surfaces of Picasso and Braque's cubist paintings are likewise determined, on the one hand, by the artists' faith that meaning (and posterity) could still be forged from arbitrariness, but, on the other,

Figure 0.3 Georges Braque, *La Mandore* (*Mandora*), winter 1909–1910. Oil on canvas, 71.1 x 55.9 cm. The Tate Gallery, London. © Estate of Georges Braque / SOCAN (2020).

by their awareness that a mode of painting devoted to the void might be indistinguishable in practice from a mere failure to communicate.

In their defenses of cubism, both Apollinaire and Kahnweiler cited Mallarmé's passionate advocacy for the painting of his intimate friend Manet as an exemplary case of "courage" in the face of a culture lagging behind aesthetics.[50] In an essay criticizing the rejection of two of Manet's paintings by the Jury of the Salon of 1874, Mallarmé claimed that the painterly qualities that the jury considered "unfinished" were the result of "the simplification achieved by a visionary gaze … upon certain procedures of painting, the principal failing of which is to veil the origins of this art made of ointments and colors."[51] One of the rejected paintings, *Le bal de l'Opéra* (*Masked Ball at the Opera*), 1873 (figure 0.4), Mallarmé noted, had pulled back this veil and depicted a contemporary Parisian crowd through "the pure medium of this art," that is to say, with the forthrightly asserted, nonsemantic materiality of paint. Manet's gesture of aesthetic disillusionment, Mallarmé declared, had thereby inserted a gap of nonsynchronous historical time into the modern work of art, one that guaranteed its current status as "unfinished" or "illegible" but secured its future contact with "the Crowd [*la Foule*]."[52] In an oracular pronouncement, Mallarmé promised his readers that "the crowd, from whom nothing is concealed, seeing that everything emanates from it, *will recognize itself, one day or another*, in [Manet's] accumulated and surviving work: and its detachment from things past will be, this time, no less than absolute."[53]

Mallarmé's hope that the public would one day recognize the very conditions of its sociability in the self-critical spirit of modern painting was more forcefully expressed in an essay on "The Impressionists and Édouard Manet" (1876). There, he proclaimed:

> The participation of a hitherto ignored people in the political life of France is a social fact that will honor the whole close of the nineteenth century. A parallel is found in artistic matters, the way being prepared by an evolution which the public with

Figure 0.4 Édouard Manet, *Le bal de l'Opéra* (*Masked Ball at the Opera*), 1873. Oil on canvas, 59.1 x 72.5 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

> rare prescience dubbed, from its first appearance, *Intransigeant*, which in political language means radical and democratic.[54]

This expression of confidence in the path of the future—a "way being prepared," an "evolution," a "prescience"—and this explicit naming of its political character—participatory, public, "radical and democratic"—are both rare for Mallarmé. Immediately preceding the cited passage, Mallarmé asserted that "the transition from the old imaginative artist and dreamer to the energetic modern worker is found in Impressionism," and noted that where a previous aesthetic aspired to "dominion over an ignorant multitude," "today the multitude demands to see with its own eyes." Yet the qualities Mallarmé imparted to such a multitude and its radical and democratic revolution to come, of which impressionism is both symptom and spur, are unfamiliar within nineteenth-century aesthetic politics. Impressionist painting, Mallarmé believed, was addressed to "new and impersonal men," "to those new-comers of tomorrow, of which each one will consent to be an unknown unit in the mighty numbers of a universal suffrage."[55] While this is self-evidently far from the caricature of social detachment and elitism that is often associated with the name "Mallarmé" in Anglophone art history, the character of these politics remains to be investigated. Writing five years after the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune, Mallarmé described the postrevolutionary subject as an "impersonal" and "unknown unit" that, like the future of poetic language, would attain its universality at the cost of becoming anonymous.

This burst of optimism, for all its equivocal character, remains exceptional in Mallarmé's writing. More persistently, he characterized the condition of his contemporary moment as an "interregnum for art," caused by the delayed appearance on the historical stage of this impersonal "Crowd."[56] In an important formulation, he exclaimed: "There's no such thing as the Present, no—a present doesn't exist. … For lack of the Crowd's declaring itself, for lack of—everything. Uninformed is he who would proclaim himself his own contemporary, deserting or usurping with equal imprudence,

when the past seems to cease and the future to stall, in view of masking the gap."[57] Against Rimbaud's maxim, "one must be absolutely modern," Mallarmé not only marked the distance separating his poetic work from its historical present, but also seemed to deny the very possibility of artistic and historical contemporaneity.[58] Mallarmé's "interregnum" was an era defined by absence and asynchrony, a period of historical latency that had "outlived beauty" but lacked the conditions for "The future verse to be released / From its precious dwelling."[59]

From one point of view, Mallarmé's "isolation" came to an end with the emergence of the avant-gardes, who incarnated the future reading public to which he had addressed his writing. Most improbably, the work with which Mallarmé's name swiftly became most associated—to the point of near exclusivity today—is the late "visual poem" *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*, in which words explode across twenty-one pages in nonsyntactical shards, taking on a variety of sizes and emphases in order to establish numerous intersecting patterns of text (figure 0.5). Most notoriously, its title unfolds in large capitals across the length of the poem, interrupted throughout by fragments in different fonts. It seems, with hindsight, to have underwritten a century's worth of experimentation with the materiality of language, from Futurism to Dada, from concrete poetry to conceptual art—a process of reception accelerating to the point where Marcel Broodthaers could proclaim, in 1969, that Mallarmé's poem was "the manifesto of contemporary art, made in the 19th century."[60] Jean-Paul Sartre, likewise, stated at the end of his disquisition on *Un coup de Dés*: "It is fitting that [Mallarmé] should die at the threshold of our century; he is its herald."[61]

Like all things Mallarméan, however, the poem's impact was delayed and circuitous. It was initially published in 1897 by the multilingual literary journal *Cosmopolis* in a typographical layout that Mallarmé judged inadequate (figure 0.6).[62] The *Cosmopolis* version was sufficiently well known to have been immediately parodied in both popular newspapers and modernist journals, but its initial effect was negligible, with scattered

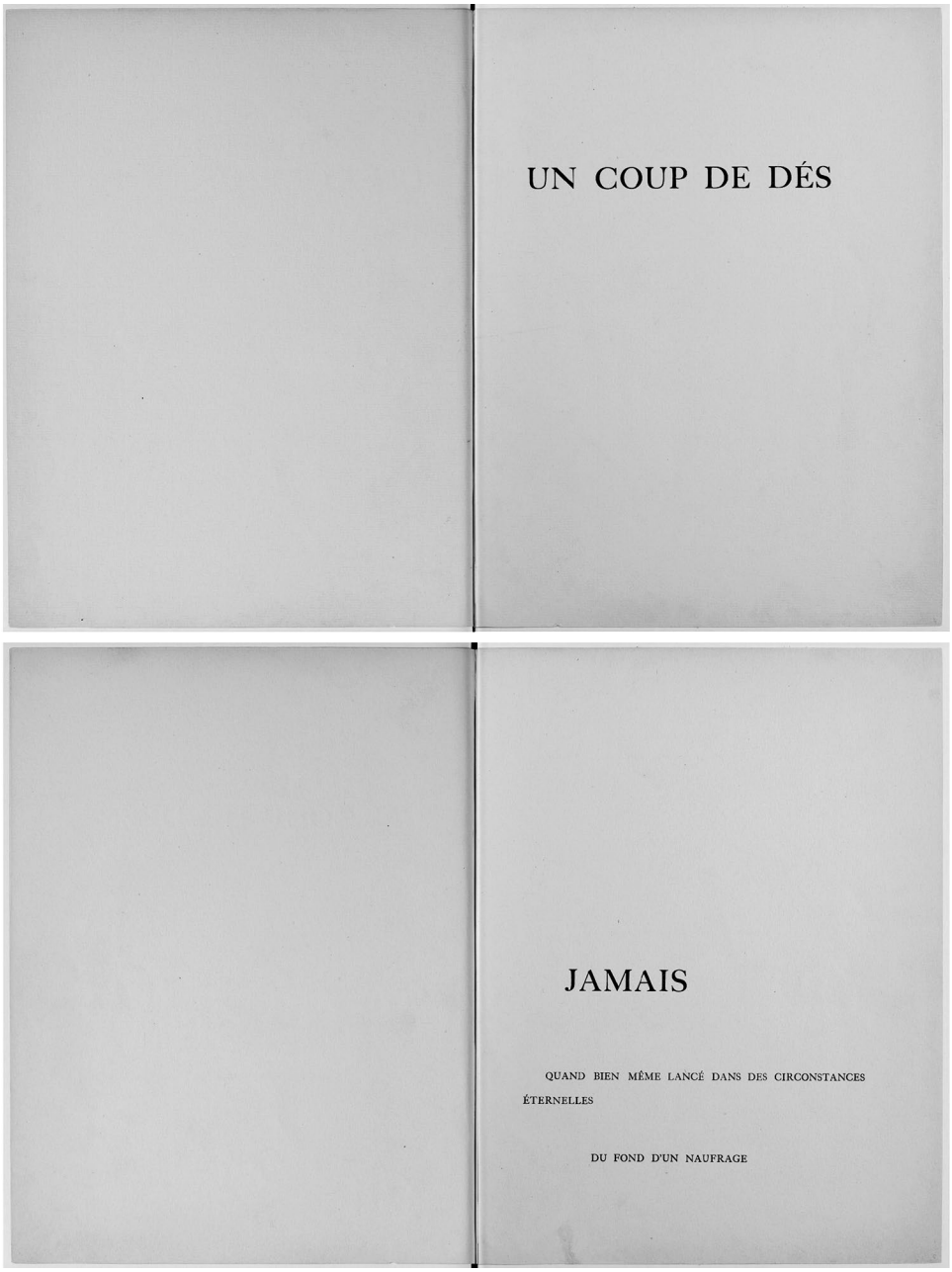

Figure 0.5 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard* (*A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance*) (Paris: Nouvelle Revue française, 1914), pp. 1–3. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

commentary limited to its visual layout and its cryptic title.[63] Mallarmé spent his last years attempting to organize a definitive and corrected edition with Ambroise Vollard, to be illustrated by Odilon Redon: Vollard, the famous art dealer (who would give Picasso his first Parisian show in June 1901), promised the poet "the most beautiful edition in the world," but never followed through—due both to his "deplorable tendency to put off everything until tomorrow" and to the fact that the Didot publishing house refused to publish it, returning the proofs with the comment "A madman wrote this."[64] It was not until 1914 that the Nouvelle Revue française published the poem in its definitive form, as a stand-alone volume mostly conforming to Mallarmé's minutely corrected proofs for the intended Vollard edition.[65] This project was brought to fruition by disciples including André Gide and Valéry, both of whom had seen the manuscript and discussed it with Mallarmé before his death in 1898.[66]

The posthumous publication of *Un coup de Dés* in 1914 meant that the avant-gardes contended with Mallarmé's text as though it had been written by a contemporary. For this reason alone, it will loom especially large in the latter half of this book, which turns to Dada during World War I and its aftermath. For example, as will be discussed in detail in chapter 3, Tzara described and justified the new aesthetic tactics that the Dadaists were working out in Zurich, above all the "simultaneous poem," as a synthesis of *Un coup de Dés*'s "typographical reform" and the cubist "transmutation of objects."[67] For many artists of the avant-garde, Mallarmé's poem was felt both to sum up the era in aesthetics and to point the way forward. In his extraordinary early history of Dada, *De Mallarmé à 391* (1922), Pierre de Massot, the writer and close friend to Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, described the indelible effect of "'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard,' these typographical researches which are one of the characteristic traits of contemporary poetry."[68] "Just as it's impossible to philosophize after Kant as we had philosophized before Kant," de Massot proclaimed, "it's impossible to write verse after Mallarmé as we had written verse before Mallarmé."[69] Picabia gave visual form to this widely shared perception that

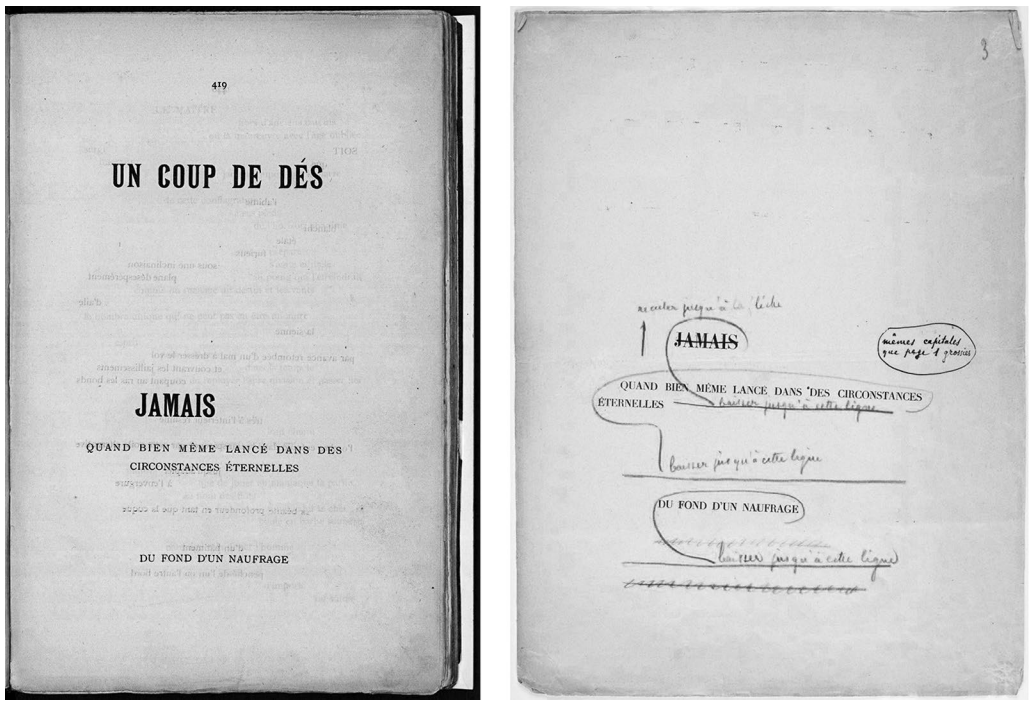

Figure 0.6 Left: Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*, 1897. Published in *Cosmopolis*, no. 17 (May 1897): 419. Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris. Right: Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*, 1897. Mallarmé's corrected proofs for the unpublished edition by Ambroise Vollard. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

Dada operated in the aftermath of *Un coup de Dés*'s epistemic break (figure 0.7): in a mechanomorphic flowchart depicting artistic and literary precursors as crossed wires running to the bomb of the "Mouvement Dada," Mallarmé is given pride of place as the first writer listed, anticipating and licensing the Dada hybridity of visual, linguistic, and musical practices.

However, *Un coup de Dés* stands unreconciled with two of the foremost ambitions of avant-garde "spatialized writing" that came in its immediate wake: namely, the imperative of poetic "freedom" (in "free verse" and in Futurist *parole in libertà*) and the transformation of the poem into a typographic picture of what it describes (as in Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*). At the time of its initial publication, *Un coup de Dés* was immediately taken as a sign of Mallarmé's "conversion" to free verse by its proponents, as his final rejection of the strictures of French poetic meter that he had rigidly maintained in his published poetry.[70] But Mallarmé himself firmly rejected the rhetoric of "liberty": to the *vers-libriste* Gustave Kahn's argument that one must "loosen the instrument" of verse (as part of "an evolution in the direction of the liberty and expansion of rhythm"), Mallarmé had responded politely that, conversely, "it is necessary to tighten the instrument to the very end."[71]

The founder of Futurism, F. T. Marinetti, who had produced the first Italian translation of Mallarmé and was in close contact with Kahn, was perhaps right to insist in 1913 upon the incompatibility of the Futurist "typographic revolution" with Mallarmé's "static ideal" (notwithstanding his macho bluster against the poet's "decorative and precious aesthetic") (figure 0.8).[72] For Futurist poetry sought to synthesize precisely the two projects that Mallarmé most vehemently rejected: the "liberation" of language and its conscription in the service of resemblance (as in Marinetti's attempt to give appropriately explosive linguistic form to an artilleryman's letter from the front). Marinetti argued that the "destruction of syntax" would, on the one hand, establish "the absolute freedom of images or analogies," and, on the other, intensify language's representational function through onomatopoeia and dynamic visual patterns, in order to "imprint

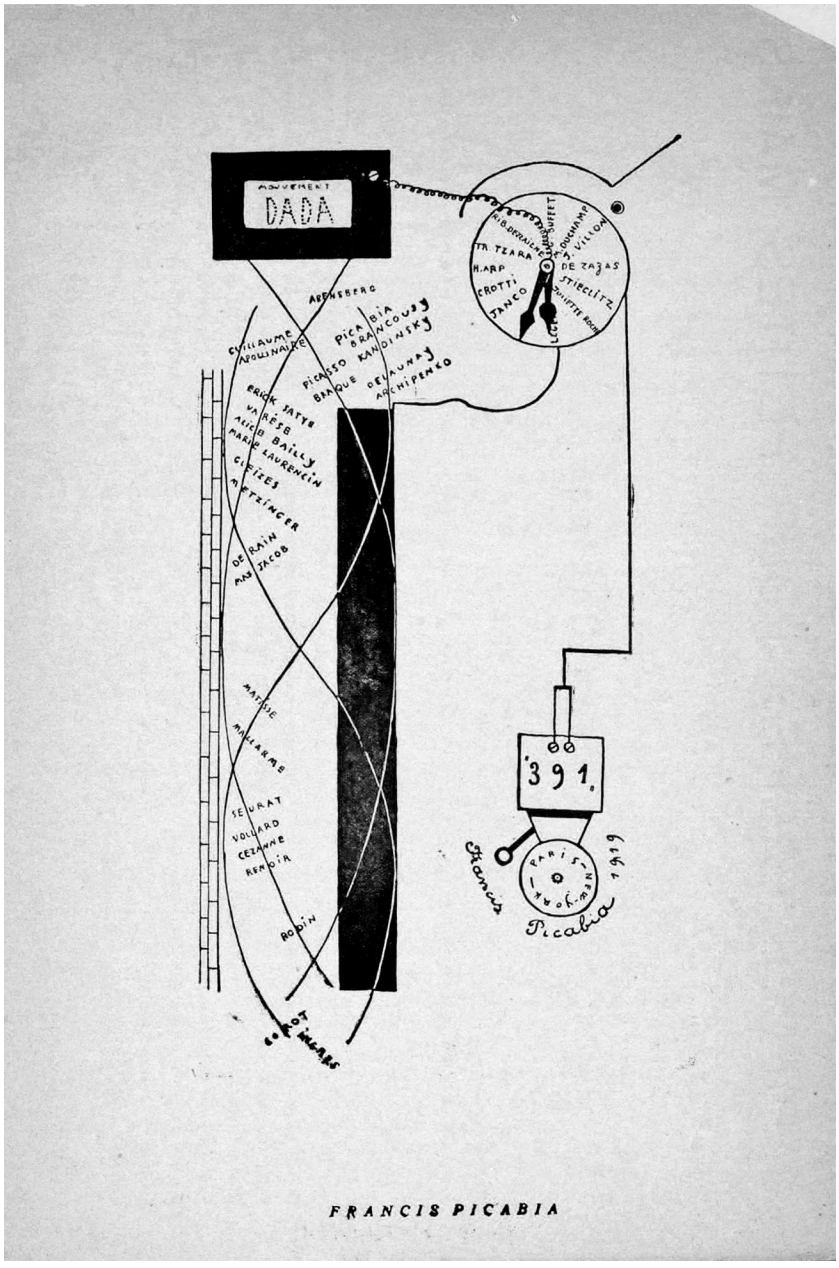

Figure 0.7 Francis Picabia, *Le mouvement Dada* (*The Dada Movement*), 1919. Published in *Dada*, no. 4–5 (May 15, 1919): 2.

Figure 0.8 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Le soir, couchée dans son lit, elle relisait la lettre de son artilleur au front* (*In the Evening, Lying on Her Bed, She Reread the Letter from Her Artilleryman at the Front*), created 1917. Published in F. T. Marinetti, *Les mots en liberté futuristes* (Milan: Edizione Futuriste di 'Poesia,' 1919), 104.

words [with] every velocity of the stars, clouds, airplanes, trains, waves, explosives, drops of seafoam, molecules and atoms."[73] As he affirmed his desire to visually and sonically materialize these modern referents in poetry, to "seize them brutally and fling them in the reader's face," he did so explicitly in opposition to the way Mallarmé "suggest[ed] an idea of sensation by means of passéist graces and affectations."[74] To fuel the vehemence of his attack, Marinetti may have recalled Mallarmé's warning about the unbridgeable gap between word and object: "Abolish the pretension, aesthetically an error, to include in the subtle paper of a volume … the intrinsic and dense wood of trees … No stone, on which the pages couldn't close."[75]

What was the point of Mallarmé's typographical experimentation in *Un coup de Dés* if he sought neither to produce an image in words nor to unleash the forces of poetic liberty? In his preface to the poem, he emphasized simply that "the 'blanks' take on an importance, striking first."[76] As one reads the poem, he continued, "the paper intervenes each time but one image, that of itself"—to the point that it includes a single completely white page. This poetic incorporation of literal emptiness, Mallarmé noted, would have the cumulative effect of "dispersing" the text upon a "surrounding silence," thereby producing a "prismatic subdivision of the Idea." The poem's putative subject of a "Maître" or "Master" at sea whose ship disappears without a trace in a storm is thus suspended typographically over the expanse of blankness, "hovering over the void."[77] The *Maître* desperately grips a pair of dice as he goes under, madly hoping to "abolish chance" through the titular toss and thereby, for obscure reasons, to guarantee his own "legacy in disappearance / to someone / ambiguous / the ulterior immemorial demon."[78] However, rather than *representing* through its visual layout the poetic image of the sinking ship or the vastness of the ocean, *Un coup de Dés* implicates the reader in the poetic quest to produce and share meaning within the infinite indifference of a universe that reduces all human effort to "some inferior lapping [*clapotis*] as though dispersing the empty act." *Un coup de Dés* summons the hope of transmitting thought across the aleatory

gaps of space and time, "accomplished in view of each null, human result"; but also stages the disappearance—or, better, submergence—of signifying subject and signified object alike in the whirlpool of writing, that "neutrality identical to the void."

Despite its status as a unicum, one should take a step back from the blinding novelty of the poem's visual layout and consider its place within the totality of Mallarmé's thought. Both *Un coup de Dés*'s "theme" of a shipwreck and its poetic task of linguistically voiding representation were worked out in an octosyllabic sonnet, rigorously traditional in structure: "À la nue accablante tu," published in 1892—the poem Tolstoy insisted was "deprived of all sense." The sonnet's opening line casts into doubt the status of poetic address, seeming to speak to the reader directly: "À la nue accablante tu" initially suggests translation as "To the overwhelming cloud, you"; but, as one continues to read to the end of the quatrain, not a single verb appears, let alone one conjugated with the second-person pronoun *tu*. Returning to the beginning, a reader may then intuit that *tu* is itself the verb: the past participle of *taire*, to silence. But subject and object remain vague. What or who has been hushed, and by what or by whom? The first line of the second quatrain suggests an answer: "Quel sépulcral naufrage (tu / le sais, écume, mais y baves)" (Some sepulchral shipwreck [you / know it, spume, foaming there]). This second *tu*, occupying the same place as the first in the quatrain's structure, at last introduces a "you": the poem is addressed not to the reader, but to the slobbering foam ("écume") that dribbles there ("y baves"), covering over, and thereby silencing, a shipwreck of which no visible sign remains (even "the mast, stripped bare, [is] abolished"). The play of homonymy established between an address to a babbling "you" ("tu") and a lapse into silence ("tu") is only the most explicit marker of an analogy established by Mallarmé between his own poetic procedure and a "vain outstretched abyss [*l'abîme vain éployé*]": indeed, the verb *baver* is used in French to describe the bleeding of ink from a pen.

This sonnet and *Un coup de Dés* both take up the model of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "MS. Found in a Bottle," in which the reader's literal

possession of the tale resolves the cliffhanger of the narrator's desperate attempt to secure the survival of his writing as he perishes in a shipwreck. But, in Mallarmé, language itself is the tempest that submerges reality, writer, and reader alike. Reader and writer, further, share the poetic experience and encounter one another as equals engaged in the collective production of fragile meaning within an impersonal medium defined by chance and emptiness.

One such reader who took up the poem's challenge was Marcel Duchamp. In 1915, he studied Walter C. Arensberg's copy of the definitive edition of *Un coup de Dés* at the very moment when he was codifying the readymade: in private notes, he copied out, fragmented, and rearranged the poem's words, drawing dice around them as he, like so many after him, searched for the system governing the poem's ordered chaos (see figure 4.4).[79] He seems to have fixated with particular intensity on the poem's final line, its sole complete sentence, isolating its four capitalized words with boxes: "Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés" (Every Thought emits a Throw of the Dice). For Mallarmé as for Duchamp, as we shall see, every communicative act was like a throw of dice "tossed into eternal circumstances," a perilous wager made against the ineradicable degree of chance built into language.[80]

"Mallarmé was a great figure," Duchamp announced in the 1940s. "This is the direction in which art should turn."[81] Yet, if Duchamp proposed a form of fidelity to Mallarmé's project, he did not conceive its *telos* to be the successful implementation of the poet's intentions, nor the posthumous resolution of his untimeliness. Rather, he proposed precisely to internalize the principle of the "delay [*retard*] … in the Mallarméan sense of the word."[82] This "delay," for Mallarmé as for Duchamp, defined the condition of modern cultural transmission, both at the artwork's or poem's metahistorical level of reception and in its semiotic interior, in the "vibratory suspense" constructed between a sign and its meaning, a gap that for both figures had come to define aesthetic experience itself in capitalist modernity.[83]

Total Expansion of the Letter was written with the conviction that grasping this skepticism about communication as a historical and aesthetic phenomenon requires careful border-crossing between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, between dance, music, and letters, and between art history, the philosophy of language, politics, and poetics. There are, consequently, several potential routes through the book, which I will now trace briefly in order to bring this introduction to a conclusion. At the most basic level of structure, this book's halves conjoin the formulation of cubism in Paris by Picasso and Braque and the international spread of Dada, moments too often artificially separated by the imperatives of academic specialization. Its four chapters will, further, track the progressive dissolution of the traditional aesthetic mediums, focusing, in order, on a formative crisis in cubism, when Kahnweiler's thesis that "painting is a writing"[84] was tested against the unreadable canvases Picasso produced during the summer of 1910, in Cadaqués, Spain; on the "hope of an anonymous art" pursued by Picasso and Braque in newspaper collage and industrial color in 1912; on the collective invention of hybrid forms of notation for movement, sound, and language in Zurich Dada, culminating in the "simultaneous poem"; and on Duchamp's *Monte Carlo Bond* (1924), an artwork and debt security intended to fund his martingale system for playing roulette.

Our passage through this varied terrain will be guided by the dialectical, rather than chronological, unfolding of Mallarmé's thought across the architecture of this book. Chapter 1 establishes Mallarmé's conception of the "negation" or "destruction" of the referent or object as it is "transposed" into the structure of language. Chapter 2 traces Mallarmé's emergence from negativity in his conviction that poetic language at its most "impersonal" or "anonymous" might converge with and transfigure the social sites where words were most literally up for sale. Chapter 3 concentrates on the *Livre*, the poet's plans for a chance-based atheistic ritual set against all myth and mimesis, intended to give concrete form to the abstract multiplicity of human communication and community. And, finally, chapter 4 turns to the actually existing relations of aesthetics to political economy,

in which, Mallarmé hoped against hope, poetic language would remain inassimilable to the representational logic of capitalism, in particular to its mediation of work by money.

Throughout, Mallarmé's thought will be treated not in isolation, nor as a kind of universal key to modernism, but as a means to stage unfamiliar dialogues. The most sustained encounters of the book will include chapter 1's account of cubism as a pictorial practice suspended vertiginously between Edmund Husserl's phenomenology—an analysis of consciousness's access to the exteriority of the world—and Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology—an investigation of the cognitive production of meaning from the structured arbitrariness of language. Chapter 2 reconstructs Mallarmé's encounter with G. W. F. Hegel's *Encyclopedia Logic* (1830), in which the poet discovered a model of language as an impersonal and aleatory force of negation. Mallarmé's prescient critique, discussed in chapter 3, of the composer Richard Wagner's "total work of art," will set the stage for the debates about the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that played out in Dada between the movement's founders, Tzara and Ball, and the dancers of Zurich's Laban School, including Maya Chrusecz, Suzanne Perrottet, Sophie Taeuber, Mary Wigman, and Käthe Wulff. Finally, following Duchamp into the casino and the financial markets, chapter 4 investigates theories of "fictitious capital," including Marx's account of "interest-bearing capital" in the third volume of *Das Kapital*, the gendering of credit and luck, and the linguistic structure of finance's claims on future value.

This book maintains that cubism and Dada mobilized and developed a crucial aspect of Mallarmé's theory of language that had barely been noted in the first waves of the poet's reception: the conviction that the medium of human sociability, language, is a structure perpetually in flux and haunted by emptiness. The multifaceted engagements of the avant-gardes with language—whether conceived as a metaphorical structure, a visual material, a score for performance, or an institution—conjoin aesthetics, politics, ontology, and linguistics nondeterministically and nonredemptively. If Mallarmé's emphasis on the abyssal indeterminacy of language will guide

our passage through the history of the avant-garde, the latter will not be reducible to the former: for, in each chapter, the artists in question identified the most radical aspects of Mallarmé's poetics—linguistic non- or self-referentiality, the universality of chance, and the poetic critique of money and labor—and collapsed them into the forms, sites, and practices of their historical moment, whether the commodified surfaces of advertising, the fracturing of linguistic community in warfare, or the sense that artistic value was indistinguishable from a gambler's bet or from financial speculation. These were the contingent grounds for the "total expansion of the letter" into twentieth-century art.

Notes

Introduction: In the Interregnum

1 "Échos de Paris," *Le Gaulois* (September 10, 1898): 1. All translations from French and German are my own, unless otherwise noted.

2 Henry Lapauze, "Une soirée chez Léon Tolstoï," *Le Gaulois* (June 12, 1896): 2.

3 Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* (*Chto takoye iskusstvo?*) (London: Walter Scott, 1898), 79–80.

4 "Échos de Paris," *Le Gaulois* (June 22, 1896): 1.

5 Ély Halpérine-Kaminsky solicited Mallarmé's letter for a publication of responses to *What Is Art?* entitled *Le Rôle de l'art d'après Tolstoï*. See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète, 1862–1871; suivi de Lettres sur la poésie, 1872–1898: avec lettres inédites*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 639–640.

6 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 700. Volumes I and II of Mallarmé's *Œuvres complètes* will henceforth be referred to as OCI and OCII.

7 Guillaume Apollinaire, "Notes on art, 1899–1914," Getty Research Institute (88-A251 880268). Willard Bohn discusses this note in his essay "Apollinaire au Center Getty," *Que Vlo-Ve ?* 4, no. 4 (October–December 1998): 117–122.

8 There are disagreements on how to capitalize Mallarmé's poem. When citing the complete title, I have maintained the idiosyncratic capitalization that he decided on in his corrections of the final printer's proof for the unpublished edition planned by Ambroise Vollard: *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*, with "*Dés*" and "*Hasard*" capitalized. Thus, when abbreviating the title, I have opted for *Un coup de Dés*.

9 Leah Dickerman wrote: "With narrative and the descriptive connection to the external world evacuated from the picture, image-making and writing emerge as simultaneous and interrelated practices with a displaced relationship to one another." Dickerman, "Inventing Abstraction," in *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 34.

10 Hugo Ball, *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield, trans. Ann Raimes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 67.

11 Mallarmé, "À Henri Cazalis, [28 avril 1866]" and "À Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [24 Septembre 1867]," in *Correspondance*, 298, 366.

12 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3. Johnson's translation of *Divagations* will henceforth be referred to as D. Cited in Maurice Blanchot, "The Book to Come," in *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 225.

13 I have translated the title of Mallarmé's "Le livre, instrument spirituel," as "The Book, Intellectual Instrument," in order to avoid the inappropriately otherworldly associations of the English word "spiritual." In this choice, I follow Anna Sigrídur Arnar, *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, the Artist's Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Mallarmé used the term "critical poem" to describe his own prose writings in the "Bibliography" he included at the end of *Divagations*, D, 287.

14 Ibid., 228.

15 Ibid., 227.

16 Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 140.

17 Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris: His Life and Work*, trans. Douglas Cooper (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969), 98–99. This book will henceforth be referred to as JG.

18 JG, 129.

19 Gino Severini, "Symbolisme Plastique et Symbolisme Littéraire," *Mercure de France*, no. 423 (February 1916): 467–468.

20 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4: *Modernism with a Vengeance*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85.

21 D, 184.

22 Ibid., 185.

23 Ball, *Flight out of Time*, 71, 65.

24 Marcel Duchamp, *Duchamp du Signe, suivi de Notes*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Paul Matisse (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), 258. Henceforth referred to as DDS.

25 I am thinking in particular about the debates of the 1980s and 1990s that centered on Picasso's *papiers collés*, most notably between Patricia Leighten and Rosalind Krauss. See, for example, Leighten, "The Insurrectionary Painter: Anarchism and the Collages, 1912–1914," in *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 121–142; and Krauss, "The Motivation of the Sign," in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 261–286.

26 D, 197.

27 Ferdinand de Saussure describes the synchronic or static dimension of language at a given moment as the "language-state." Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 82.

28 The Dada slogan appears on the front cover of the catalogue for the "First International Dada Fair" held at Otto Burchard's Berlin gallery from June 30 to August 25, 1920. See Brigid Doherty's introduction to Wieland Herzfelde, "Introduction to the First Dada Fair," *October* 105 (Summer 2003): 93–104. Kahnweiler's two great periods of writing took place during the first and second World Wars. In 1924, he wrote to Carl Einstein: "I no longer wish to publish because I am an art dealer again; it no longer seems appropriate. As for my own conscience, I could publish because I buy only things that I love, but the public would see commercialism in it. Therefore, I am silent." Werner Spies, "Vendre des tableaux: Donner à lire," in *Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler: Marchand, éditeur, écrivain* (Paris: Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984), 33. Also cited in Yve-Alain Bois, "Kahnweiler's Lesson," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 67.

29 OCII, 697–698.

30 D, 210.

31 OCII, 698.

32 Ibid. Ghil, for example, claimed to have derived "the laws of a verbal music" from Hermann von Helmholtz. René Ghil, *Méthode évolutive-instrumentiste d'une poésie rationnelle* (Paris: Albert Savine 1889), 12. On the scientific pretensions of *vers libre*, see Robert Michael Brain, "Genealogy of 'Zang Tumb Tumb': Experimental Phonetics, Vers Libre, and Modernist Sound Art," *Grey Room* 43 (Spring 2011): 88–117.

33 OCII, 700.

34 D, 219.

35 Ibid., 111.

36 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum Books, 1997), 24.

37 Ibid.; translation modified.

38 See Maria Stavrinaki's analysis of Dada temporality, in particular her argument that, for Dada, "mastering the present … meant defending its sovereignty against the normativity of the past and the utopia of the future, the two temporal orders that had confiscated the history of modern times." Stavrinaki, *Dada Presentism: An Essay on Art & History*, trans. Daniela Ginsburg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 23–24.

39 JG, 79.

40 I am tacitly referring to the debates spurred by Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). See in particular Hal Foster's deployment of Freud's concept of "deferred action" [*Nachträglichkeit*] as a means to account for the relationship of the "neo-avant-gardes" to their "historical" antecedents. Foster, "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?," in *Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 1–34. Rebecca Comay has recently noted a similar challenge posed by Hegel's philosophy: "How to conceptualize lateness without assuming the stable reference point of a uniform and continuous time frame from which to take the measure of the delay?" Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 6.

41 Adorno opened his book *Negative Dialectics* with the aphorism "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Continuum Books, 1981), 1.

42 See Thierry de Duve's series of articles on the structure of reception in modernism. De Duve, "Pardon my French," *Artforum* 52, no. 2 (October 2013): 246–253; "Don't Shoot the Messenger," *Artforum* 52, no. 3 (November 2013): 265–273; "Why Was Modernism Born in France?," *Artforum* 52, no. 5 (January 2014): 190–197; "The Invention of Non-Art: A History," *Artforum* 52, no. 6 (February 2014):192–199; and "The Invention of Non-Art: A Theory," *Artforum* 52, no. 7 (March 2014): 270–275.

43 Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Confessions esthétiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 219. Henceforth referred to as CE.

44 Maurice Raynal, *Picasso* (Paris: G. Crès, 1922), 52–53.

45 In the catalogue to his important exhibition at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nantes, *L'action restreinte: L'art moderne selon Mallarmé*, Jean-François Chevrier argued that this position was shared by Kahnweiler, whose "main concern was to disengage cubism from literature, in particular from symbolism and from the mediation of Apollinaire, and to re-center it on the works of its two inventors, Picasso and Braque." Jean-François Chevrier, *L'action restreinte: L'art moderne selon Mallarmé* (Paris: Hazan, 2005), 116.

46 OCI, 42.

47 Louis Goldaine and Pierre Astrer, *Ces peintres vous parlent* (Paris: Les Éditions du temps, 1964), 18; cited by Chevrier, *L'action restreinte*, 113. As Chevrier notes, Yakov Tugendhold cited this poem by Mallarmé to account for what he saw in Picasso's studio before 1914. Tugendhold, "La Collection Française de S. I. Chtchoukine," *Apollon*, no. 1 (1914), translated in *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, no. 4 (April–June 1980): 317; cited in Chevrier, *L'action restreinte*, 113.

48 Ibid. The term "rhythmization" is Kahnweiler's and is used in Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*, trans. Henry Aronson (New York: Wittenborn, Schulz, 1949), 12. Henceforth referred to as RC.

49 OCI, 42–43.

50 Kahnweiler cited Mallarmé on Manet in "Mallarmé et la peinture," CE, 215–217. In his review of the 1910 Salon des Indépendants, Apollinaire recounted an anecdote regarding Mallarmé's defense of Manet during the *Olympia* scandal, and, in a manuscript note, he also cited Mallarmé's essay on Manet. See Guillaume Apollinaire, "Watch out for the Paint! The Salon des Indépendants, 6000 paintings are exhibited," in Apollinaire, *Apollinaire on Art*, ed. Leroy C. Breunig (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 64; and Apollinaire, "Conférence sur l'art nouveau" (Fonds Apollinaire, Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet: MS 7544).

51 OCII, 411. Cited by Kahnweiler in CE, 216. On this text by Mallarmé and its relevance to Manet's painting, see Jean Clay, "Ointments, Makeup, Pollen," *October* 27 (Winter 1983): 3–44.

52 OCII, 411.

53 Ibid., 414.

54 This essay exists today only in English translation, with the French original lost. See Mallarmé, "The Impressionists and Édouard Manet," in *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874–1886* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1996), 33.

55 Ibid., 34.

56 D, 144.

57 Ibid., 218.

58 Arthur Rimbaud, "Une saison en enfer," in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 116.

59 D, 12; OCI, 30.

60 Marcel Broodthaers, *Collected Writings*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), 232.

61 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Mallarmé, or the Poet of Nothingness*, trans. Ernest Sturm (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1988), 145.

62 On the differences between the *Cosmopolis* edition and the definitive NRF version, see Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, "Note relative au Coup de Dés," *Critique*, no. 397–398 (June–July 1980): 633–659. For a detailed account of the poem's reception, see Thierry Roger, *L'archive du* Coup de dés: *Étude critique de la reception d'*Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard *de Mallarmé, 1897–2007* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2010).

63 For example, soon after its publication in *Cosmopolis*, *La Plume* ran a parodic dialogue in which a pretentious writer tells of a new poem by "Alfane Malbardé." He summarizes Mallarmé's preface and declaims the poem in its near-entirety, shouting "*UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS*" loud enough "to break glass." Adolphe Retté, "Intermède d'un jeune homme à la grosse tête," *La Plume*, no. 200 (August 1897): 539–540. A decade later, a theater column described a gambler "repeating in order to anesthetize through stupor … that phrase of Mallarmé's '*Jamais un coup de dé n'abolira le hasard*' [*sic*]" "Courrier du Théatre," *Gil Blas* (March 27, 1907): 3.

64 Ambroise Vollard, *Souvenirs d'un marchand de tableaux* (Paris: A. Michel, 1937), 287–288. On December 14, 1896, Vollard sent a note to Mallarmé to secure exclusive publication rights for the poem, writing: "I discussed with M. Redon the very great desire I have to publish something by you with illustrations by him. M. Redon filled me with joy by telling me that you are not opposed. … I want to tell you right from the beginning that I would be prepared to spend anything necessary for this book to have the most beautiful edition in the world: the question to be discussed would be that of your honorarium—excuse this dealer's term." This unpublished letter is held in the Musée départemental Stéphane Mallarmé in Vulaine-sur-Seine, acquired in 2011.

65 The NRF edition, however, disregards Mallarmé's important specification of the Didot font.

66 See, for example, the extraordinary texts Paul Valéry devoted to his recollections of Mallarmé's final years and to *Un coup de Dés* collected in *Variété*. Valéry, *Œuvres*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 619–709. See also Mallarmé's letter to Gide describing the *Cosmopolis* publication in Mallarmé, *Correspondance*, 631–632.

67 Tristan Tzara, "Note pour les bourgeois," *Cabaret Voltaire*, no. 1 (1916): 6.

68 Pierre de Massot, *De Mallarmé à 391* (Saint-Raphaël: Au Bel Exemplaire, 1922), 12.

69 Ibid., 26.

70 Jean de Gourmont, "L'art et le Vers Libre," *Chronique des livres* 4, no. 4 (August 25, 1903): 98. Kahn, for his part, noted that "the final poetic publication of Stéphane Mallarmé is in free verse. This is *Un Coup de Dés* … , which was to be the first of a series of ten poems in free verse." Gustave Kahn, *Symbolistes et décadents* (1902) (Geneva: Slatkine, 1977), 353.

71 Ibid., 24, 10.

72 Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax—Radio Imagination—Words in Freedom," in *Futurism: An Anthology*, eds. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Witman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 150. Marinetti's notes for his translation of Mallarmé's *Vers et prose* in 1908 are held at the Getty: Marinetti, "Versi e Prose, prima traduzione italiana" (Getty Box 1: Folder 42). On Marinetti's relationship to Mallarmé, Kahn, and symbolism more broadly, see Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 201-213. On Marinetti and Kahn's relationship between 1898 and 1913, see Elizabeth W. Easton, "Marinetti before the First Manifesto," *Art Journal* 41, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 313–316.

73 Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax," 146.

74 Ibid., 150.

75 OCII, 210.

76 OCI, 391.

77 Ibid., 376–377.

78 Ibid., 374.

79 This manuscript by Duchamp will be discussed at length in chapter 4. Marcel Duchamp, "Quand bien même …" in the Arensberg Archives, Philadelphia Museum of Art, box 43, folio 26. First published and analyzed by Molly Nesbit and Noami Sawelson-Gorse in their "Concept of Nothing: New Notes by Marcel Duchamp and Walter Arensberg," *The Duchamp Effect: Essays, Interviews, Round Table*, eds. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 137.

80 OCI, 369.

81 James Johnson Sweeney, "Conversation with Marcel Duchamp: Eleven Europeans in America," *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 13, no. 4/5 (1946): 21.

82 Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 40.

83 D, 235.

84 CE, 219.

Chapter 1: The Muted Object

1 Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "Mallarmé et la peinture," *Les Lettres*, 3e année (Paris, 1948): 53–68, a special issue dedicated to Mallarmé. The essay was later collected in CE, 214–221.