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Paul Signac's Decorative Propaganda of the 1890s*

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Abstract

In the 1890s the political and artistic ambitions of the neo-impressionist artist Paul Signac were embodied by a series of decorative projects. This article contends that Signac, inspired by anarcho-communist discourse and the prospect of revolution, attempted to synthesize in these works the didactic logic of propaganda and "purely aesthetic emotion." This synthesis was epitomized by the explicit deployment of two systems, divisionism and decorative pattern. With these systems, Signac hoped to initiate contemporary viewers into the aesthetic and social harmony of an anarcho-communist future. In the interest of addressing larger audiences, particularly among workers, he imagined proletarian spaces for his work. But the didactic elements of Signac's painting met with critical resistance, and public sites he envisioned never materialized. Faced with this lack of recognition, and with a diminished revolutionary outlook in the wake of the *Procès des Trente*, Signac focused his painting on atemporal landscapes. This trajectory has been read as one of aesthetic liberation; this article seeks to retrieve the extent to which it was also one of constraint, tied to the frustration of Signac's political aspirations.

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Introduction

[1] In a 26 December 1894 journal entry, the neo-impressionist painter Paul Signac (1863-1935) wrote:

Félix remarks to Thevenot that anarchist terrorism has done much more for propaganda than twenty years of Reclus or Kropotkin's brochures. He demonstrates the logic of the various attacks [...] It's the attack of [Émile] Henry, directed at the electors – perhaps guiltier than the elected, whom they force to serve as deputies – that seems to him the most 'anarchist'.¹

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¹ "Félix fait remarquer à Thevenot que les attentats anarchistes ont fait beaucoup plus pour la propagande que les vingt ans de brochures de Reclus ou de Kropotkine. Il montre la logique des

[2] Félix Fénéon (18461-1944), Signac's friend and fellow anarchist, was commenting on a series of anarchist terrorist attacks (*attentats*) that struck Paris, beginning in the 1880s and culminating in a wave of terrorist violence from 1892 to 1894.² Fénéon – who had spent much of the preceding summer in Mazas prison, accused of a similar attack on the restaurant Foyot – singled out Émile Henry's bombing of "innocent" patrons at the Café Terminus for particular praise.³ Unchastened by imprisonment or his narrow acquittal at trial, the Fénéon of Signac's journal argued decisively for a violent form of *la propagande par le fait* (propaganda by the deed): action as the means of gaining adherents to the anarchist cause, and, ultimately, of dismantling the capitalist socio-economic order.⁴ The critic gave theoretical propaganda – the anarcho-communist "brochures" of Élisée Reclus and Pierre Kropotkin – short shrift.⁵ In the debate over what form of propaganda best served anarchist revolution, Fénéon's position was clear.

[3] Events suggest Signac's contrary view on the matter.⁶ Even as anarchist "deeds" continued to strike Paris, and Signac's friends and colleagues fled or were rounded up in

divers attentats [...] C'est l'attentat d'Henry, s'adressant aux électeurs, peut-être plus coupables que les élus, puisque ceux-ci sont forcés par eux de faire ce métier de députés, qui lui semble le plus 'anarchiste.'" Paul Signac, "Extraits du Journal inédit de Paul Signac I, 1894-1895," in: *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 36 (1949), 97-128, here 113. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

² Fénéon was also an art critic and a champion of neo-impressionism. A table providing a list of the main anarchist attacks in this period ("*l'ère des attentats*"), as well as the executions of their perpetrators (when identified), can be found in Jean Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France: Des origines à 1914*, vol. 1, Paris 1975, 214.

³ Émile Henry threw a bomb into the Gare Saint-Lazare's Café Terminus on 12 February 1894 – wounding twenty, of whom one died – and was captured (with difficulty) while trying to escape. During the investigation he took responsibility for a previous bomb, which had resulted in five deaths at a police station on the rue des Bons Enfants on 8 November 1893. These *attentats* are discussed in detail in Walter Badiar, *Émile Henry: De la propagande par le fait au terrorisme anarchiste*, St Georges d'Oléron 2007, particularly 67-97. The 4 April 1894 bombing of the Foyot restaurant wounded four people, including the poet and anarchist sympathizer Laurent Tailhade. For an account of the implications of the Foyot bombing, see Howard G. Lay, "Beau Geste! (On the Readability of Terrorism)," in: *Yale French Studies* 101 (2002), 79-102. In her biography of Fénéon, Joan Halperin suggested that the critic was in fact responsible for the Foyot bombing, a thesis that has been challenged by Philippe Oriol, among others. Joan Ungersma Halperin, *Félix Fénéon, Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, New Haven 1988, 275-276; Philippe Oriol, *À propos de l'attentat Foyot: Quelques questions et quelques tentatives de réponses*, Paris 1993.

⁴ Fénéon was tried, in the context of the "*Procès des Trente*," in August 1894. His narrow acquittal has been attributed to persuasive character witnesses (including Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Henry) and his own clever responses to questioning. See Chapter 14, "Imprisonment and Trial," in Halperin, *Félix Fénéon, Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, 279-295, as well as Marie-Louise Fénéon and Félix Fénéon, *Le procès des trente: Vu à travers la presse de l'époque telle qu'elle a été conservée par Madame Fénéon mère et annotée par Félix Fénéon à l'issue de son procès*, ed. Maurice Imbert, Tusson 2004.

⁵ Theory was the term used by the anarcho-communists themselves to distinguish various forms of propaganda, primarily written and oral, from revolutionary action. See, for example, "Lutte et théorie," in: *La Révolte, organe communiste-anarchiste* I, no. 21 (11-17 February 1888), 1-2.

⁶ Signac did write the following in an 1893 letter to his friend and colleague Théo van Rysselberghe: "Je regrette plus l'incendie de la maison Hanseatique que la bombe parlementaire [...]" (the maison Hanséatique was a 16th century building on the Antwerp docks that burnt down in 1893). But this statement should not be taken as an endorsement of terrorist violence, since Signac applied the verb "regret" to both events, and the parliamentary bombing resulted only in minor injuries. Undated letter [1893] from Signac to Théo van Rysselberghe, Théo van Rysselberghe Correspondence, The Getty Research Library, Los Angeles.

mass arrests of anarchist sympathizers, the artist was working on a rather apposite image: *Au temps d'harmonie: l'âge d'or n'est pas dans le passé, il est dans l'avenir* (*In Time of Harmony: The Golden Age is not in the Past, It is in the Future*), 1894-95 (Fig. 4).⁷ Not only did this vision of a harmonious anarchist future occlude the violence that had become anarchism's public face in this period, but it also provided the kind of didactic image demanded by anarchist theorists like Kropotkin and Jean Grave.⁸ Furthermore, Signac's direct involvement with anarcho-communist publications, whether books, journals, or brochures, would only increase over the next decade.⁹

[4] Nevertheless, the relationship between Signac's work and "propaganda by the deed" is more complex than this bare summary allows, and in this article I will explore the conceptual space opened up by Fénéon's comment, and Signac's lack of editorial. The painter, I think, was struck by the terms of Fénéon's argument: the privileging of action over theory, and the association of logic with violence. Fénéon's praise of the latter was both similar and antithetical to Signac's own reflections on the revolutionary efficacy of art. In the 1890s, Signac attempted to transcend the division between theory and action, between propaganda and aesthetics, with an artistic intervention analogous in some ways to propaganda by the deed: the art of painting as a non-verbal act that would unite emotion and reason to "awaken popular consciousness."¹⁰ But in place of explosives, Signac used explicit decorative line and color. In place of mangled bodies, he aimed for the solidarity of free association. And in place of momentary rupture and violence (the "summary glow" of the bomb), Signac sought an enduring aesthetic and social harmony.¹¹

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Propaganda and Revolution

[5] As crystallized in the writings of Kropotkin, Reclus and Grave, anarcho-communist theory called for the destruction of the capitalist state and the elimination of its

⁷ The painting, n. 253 in the *catalogue raisonné* (CR henceforward), was exhibited in April and May 1895 at the *Salon des artistes indépendants*. Françoise Cachin with Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon, *Signac: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, Paris 2000, 215-16.

⁸ See, for example, the discussion of art in Kropotkin's "Aux Jeunes," as published in Pierre Kropotkine, *Paroles d'un révolté*, Paris 1885, 66-67. Note that discussions of "art" in this period typically referred to literature and music as well as to painting.

⁹ See the appendix of artists' contributions to Jean Grave, as well as a selection of letters from Signac to Grave, in Robert L. Herbert and Eugenia Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac and Others I," in: *The Burlington Magazine* 102, no. 692 (November 1960), 473-482, here 482; Robert L. Herbert and Eugenia Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac and Others II," in: *The Burlington Magazine* 102, no. 693 (December 1960), 517-522, here 519-521. See also Aline Dardel, *Les Temps Nouveaux, 1895-1914: Un hebdomadaire anarchiste et la propagande par l'image*, exh. cat., Paris 1987.

¹⁰ "[...] réveiller la conscience populaire." The phrase appeared in an article that has been attributed to Paul Brousse, whom Maitron identified as the main commentator of propaganda by the deed. Anonymous [Paul Brousse], *Bulletin de la Fédération jurassienne* (5 August 1877). Cited in Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France: Des origines à 1914*, 1, 76-77.

¹¹ "Lueur sommaire" is Stéphane Mallarmé's phrase, as I will discuss later in this article.

foundation, private property.¹² This revolution would make way for a more "natural" form of existence: a stateless society in which individuals could freely associate in the context of small local communities, each owning the means of production; the loose federation of these communities would mirror the anarchist ideal of individual autonomy within the collective. In contrast to communists and socialists, anarcho-communists stressed the capacity of exemplary actions and words to result in a spontaneous, popular outpouring of revolutionary fervor. The people needed to be made aware, through propaganda, of their ongoing oppression under the current economic and social regime. *Propaganda* required careful organization; with its success, the revolution would organize itself.¹³ Hence the centrality of propaganda to the anarchist cause. But this focus raised the following questions: how was revolutionary awareness best achieved, and what relation would it bear to actual revolt? In late-19th-century France, the answers centered on the debate over "propaganda by the deed" and "theoretical propaganda."

[6] "Propaganda by the deed" – a concept in keeping with Michael Bakunin's final privileging of action over ideas – emerged out of anti-authoritarian reflection and practice during the 1870s.¹⁴ It was perceived as the solution to an entwined problem: the need to spread revolutionary consciousness among the masses, and the frustration of militants with the failure of their propaganda to generate mass insurrection.¹⁵ Anarchist theorists such as Paul Brousse and Kropotkin concluded that overt insurrectional action was an ideal means to attack the oppressive social order and/or realize anarchist ideals, while providing the people with concrete, exemplary deeds.¹⁶ In the words of Brousse, the

¹² My presentation of anarchist theory, and its implications for art, are informed by Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France: Des origines à 1914*, 1; Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac and Others I"; John G. Hutton, *Neo-impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, Baton Rouge 1994, 46-114; Robyn Roslak, "The Politics of Aesthetic Harmony: Neo-Impressionism, Science, and Anarchism," in: *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 3 (September 1991), 381-390; Robyn Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France: Painting, Politics and Landscape*, Aldershot 2007, 1-35; Alexander Varias, "Art and Anarchy," in: *Paris and the Anarchists: Aesthetes and Subversives during the Fin-de-Siècle*, New York 1996, 121-169.

¹³ This theme was returned to again and again in the pages of *La Révolte*. See, for example, "Lutte et théorie," 2. For a discussion of revolution as the abrupt culmination of a natural, evolutive process, see Jean Grave, *La société mourante et l'anarchie*, Paris 1893, 123-126.

¹⁴ Upon retiring, in 1873, from his public role at the center of the anarchist movement, Bakunin wrote in a farewell letter (printed in the 12 October 1873 *Bulletin de la Fédération jurassienne*) that "le temps des grands discours théoriques, imprimés ou parlés, est passé. [...] Le temps n'est plus aux idées, il est aux faits et aux actes." Reproduced in Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France: Des origines à 1914*, 1, 73. The development of the concept of propaganda by the deed is analyzed in Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872-1886*, Cambridge and New York 1989, 76-91.

¹⁵ Uri Eisenzweig has argued that the concept emerged out of a sense of the failure of language to communicate, and thus of its inability to translate into revolution. He also highlighted the close relationship between the discourse on propaganda by the deed and the consolidation of anarcho-communism as a distinct movement. Uri Eisenzweig, *Fictions de l'anarchisme*, Paris 2001, 74-75; 80-82.

¹⁶ For the idea that "propaganda by the deed" was more transparent than words, see this passage in a letter from Carlo Cafiero to Enrico Malatesta, reproduced in the *Bulletin de la Fédération jurassienne* (3 December 1876): "le moyen de propagande le plus efficace, et le seul qui, sans tromper et corrompre les masses, puisse pénétrer dans les couches sociales les plus profondes."

anarchist "idea will appear, not on paper, nor in a journal, nor in a painting; it will not be sculpted in marble, nor carved in stone, nor cast in bronze: it will walk, in flesh and bone, living, before the people."¹⁷ In other words, "propaganda by the deed" bypassed all forms of representation, including art, by putting theory into practice. The deed's potential to transform into outright revolt blurred the boundary between propaganda and revolution. Even if this transformation failed to materialize, anarchists could console themselves with the deed's value as propaganda: its "living" presence, no matter how short-lived, furnished the desired anarchist examples; its extinction at the hands of authority highlighted capitalist oppression; both drew attention to the anarchist cause.¹⁸

[7] In the period following its inception, the concept of "propaganda by the deed" was subject to two main developments. First, the term became indissoluble from violent terrorist acts, namely bombings, thefts and assassinations.¹⁹ Second, anarcho-communist enthusiasm for such action waned.²⁰ While exhortations to violence could still be found, well into the nineties, in publications like Émile Pouget's *Le Père Peinard*, figures like Kropotkin, Reclus, and Grave had reversed their position on the matter. As indicated in *La Révolte*, they had concluded that man's insufficiently advanced state of consciousness necessitated a "time of propaganda."²¹ Inflammatory rhetoric and action should be deferred to a period of imminent revolution:

It is not a matter of taking action, but of spreading ideas that create men of action [...] [A]narchists [...] must seek to lead individuals to reason for themselves, [...] to become capable of directing their own acts [...] They must not act solely on the impulse of whatever cerebral exacerbation leads an individual to commit acts,

Cafiero and Malatesta were Italian anarchists, members of what is considered the first group to put into practice the passage from "ideas" to "deeds." In this letter Cafiero used the term "fait insurrectionnel" rather than "propagande par le fait." This portion of the text is reproduced and discussed in Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France: Des origines à 1914*, 1, 75-77.

¹⁷ "L'idée sera jetée, non sur le papier, non sur un journal, non sur un tableau, elle ne sera pas sculptée en marbre, ni taillée en pierre, ni coulée en bronze: elle marchera, en chair et en os, vivante, devant le peuple." Anonymous [Paul Brousse], *Bulletin de la Fédération jurassienne* (5 August 1877). I have adapted the translation from Howard Lay, who reproduced and discussed this passage in Lay, *Beau Geste! (On the Readability of Terrorism)*, 85.

¹⁸ According to Cahm, it was the deed's direct revolutionary potential that attracted a militant like Kropotkin, who hoped that insurrectional acts might transform into a larger revolt. Cahm contrasts this attitude with that of Brousse, who she argues was almost entirely preoccupied with deeds as propaganda (i.e. for the attention they brought to the anarchist cause). Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872-1886*, 99-105.

¹⁹ The progressive alignment of the concept of propaganda by the deed with individual terrorist acts is discussed in Vivien Bouhey, *Les Anarchistes contre la République, 1880 à 1914: Contribution à l'histoire des réseaux sous la Troisième République*, Rennes 2008, 139-142.

²⁰ As described in Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France: Des origines à 1914*, 1, 260-61. Scholars have provided different reasons for this ambivalence. While Maitron identified it with the increasing interest in syndicalist action, Eisenzweig has argued that once the consolidation of anarcho-communism was accomplished, the inherent contradiction of the concept – a form of communication that would transcend representation – was its undoing. Cahm identified an early distaste for the results and implications of violent acts, such as assassinations, originating in individual impulse. Eisenzweig, *Fictions de l'anarchisme*, 85-86; Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872-1886*, 109-115.

²¹ "Lutte et théorie," 2.

possibly violent, the significance of which he is unaware, and which leave him without force or energy once the paroxysm has passed, allowing himself be enslaved again.²²

[8] The journal's articles regularly insisted on the importance of logic and reason for both the creation and reception of anarchist propaganda. In contrast, the actions associated with "propaganda by the deed" were mistrusted as unreflective, unconscious manifestations of excessive emotion and feeling.²³ Without the preparation of reasoned propaganda, insurrectional action subjugated rather than enfranchised, thereby delaying an enduring, *collective* revolution. So, while Fénéon emphasized the *logic* of the *attentats* when arguing for their superiority as propaganda, the contributors to *La Révolte* saw logic as antithetical to such deeds.²⁴ Before the terrorism of the early 1890s, Jean Grave's circle had already repudiated the notion that individual terrorist acts could synthesize propaganda and deed. They portrayed such acts as individual manifestations without collective results, and deferred revolution to a time when the masses would be ready.

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Art and Propaganda

[9] The discussions of propaganda by the deed in *La Révolte* had a number of affinities with Grave's conception of art, perhaps explaining his initial disinterest in the latter. While Pouget had already initiated a visual campaign in keeping with his inflammatory rhetoric, in 1891 Grave largely deferred the "question of art," implying that it was the kind of individualist endeavor best reserved for a future anarchist society.²⁵

²² "Il ne s'agit pas de passer à l'action, il faut répandre des idées qui créent les hommes d'action [...] [L]es anarchistes [...] doivent chercher à amener les individus à se raisonner eux-mêmes, [...] à se faire capables de diriger leurs propres actes [...] Ils ne doivent pas agir seulement sous le coup d'une exacerbation cérébrale quelconque qui entraîne l'individu à commettre des actes, violents peut-être, dont il ignore la portée, [...] et le laissent sans force ni énergie, une fois la surexcitation passée, en sorte qu'il [...] se laisse enchaîner de nouveau." "Lutte et théorie," 2.

²³ Reason and logic was privileged over emotion and feeling because "au lieu d'en faire des *croyants* nous voulons en faire des *convaincus*." "La Verité sans phrase," I, no. 38 (23-28 June 1888), 1-2, here 2.

²⁴ Note that Fénéon highlighted the *attentat* of Émile Henry, the most articulate of the terrorists. In his deposition (as reported in *L'Écho de Paris*), Henry explained that he had targeted a café because all members of the bourgeoisie were guilty participants in the capitalist oppression of the people, whose own "innocents" were never spared. Edgard Troimaux, "Émile Henry: Les explosions du café Terminus et de la rue des Bons-Enfants," in: *L'Écho de Paris: Journal littéraire et politique du matin*, no. 3626 (30 April 1894), 1-2. The version from *La Gazette des Tribunaux* is reproduced in Badier, *Émile Henry: De la propagande par le fait au terrorisme anarchiste*, 193-199. Henry's capture, trial, and execution had provided him with a forum, just as Fénéon's own trial gave the critic an opportunity to mock the court and its proceedings. A distrust of "propaganda by the deed" had already begun to manifest itself in the pages of *Le Révolté*, *La Révolte*'s predecessor. I have nevertheless associated this framework with *La Révolte*, in which it was more firmly established. *La Révolte* (published from 1887 to 1894) is also more relevant to the period I am examining.

²⁵ In response to the question of what role art would have in a socialist or anarchist society, it was argued (no doubt by Grave) in *La Révolte* that, though art was not one of the paper's primary concerns, it would flourish in a future society in which machines and science would leave more room for intellectual and artistic endeavors. The article pointed to Oscar Wilde's description of art as the supreme manifestation of individualism (in an essay reproduced in *La Révolte*'s literary supplement). "Question d'art," in: *La Révolte: organe communiste-anarchiste* IV, no. 43 (10-17 July 1891), 2; Oscar Wilde, "Individualisme," in: *La Révolte (supplément littéraire)* III, no. 43 (12-18 July 1890), 1-2. Grave repeated Wilde's characterization in Jean Grave, *La société future*,

When Grave later enlisted the work of artists for *La Révolte's* successor, *Les Temps Nouveaux*, he framed it as a means to sell propaganda rather than as a form of propaganda itself.²⁶ Nevertheless, he urged engaged artists to deploy their work in the service of the people, making them aware – through explicit anarchist iconography – of their oppression, as well as the benefits of an anarchist future.²⁷ In 1899, Grave expressed his disappointment with the results, by criticizing the inability of contemporary art to "unite the cold reason of the work of propaganda with art's emotional fervor."²⁸ Since art, according to Grave, was associated with emotions, the senses, and the unconscious, it was vulnerable to the same critiques as "propaganda by the deed." "[E]motional fervor" was not so far from "cerebral exacerbation," and Grave spoke of the viewer's subjection to, rather than emancipation by, art's "charm."²⁹ The question, then, was how to rationalize art for the purpose of revolutionary awareness.

[10] This is a question that Signac was already attempting to answer during the late 1880s. Anarchist discourse on art and propaganda encouraged him to think about the role of his art as a form of rational propaganda. But it might also have encouraged him to see his art in terms of the qualities associated with "propaganda by the deed": art as an impassioned, intuitive act. For Signac, the association of art with action lay not so much in the realm of iconography as in that of form. He indicated as much in an anonymous editorial published in *La Révolte*, in which he equated "impressionists" and "revolutionaries."³⁰ In the text, Signac associated the neo-impressionist technique with

Bibliothèque sociologique, Paris 1895, 368. Pouget used images as another tool to reach his less educated audience, which he thought should portray social inequities and revolt as clearly as possible. The emotion and sensation that Grave associated with art was well suited to Pouget's visceral language, as was the purposefully rough style of images provided by artists like Maximilien Luce. See Howard G. Lay, "Réflexions d'un gniaff. On Emile Pouget and *Le Père Peinard*," in: *Making the News: Modernity and the Mass Press in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. Dean de la Motte and Jeannene M. Przyblyski, Amherst 1999, 82-159, here 110-120. The Herberts argued that Pouget's use of imagery inspired Grave's later efforts with *Les Temps Nouveaux*. They also indicated, based on correspondence in the Signac archives, that Signac knew Pouget. Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac and Others I," 477.

²⁶ "J'aurais l'intention de demander – à l'œil – aux artistes que nous connaissons, un dessin ou deux, de façon à former un album d'une trentaine de planches que l'on mettrait en vente *au profit du journal*." Letter from Jean Grave to Camille Pissarro, 25 March 1896, reproduced in Dardel, "*Les Temps Nouveaux*," 1895-1914: *Un hebdomadaire anarchiste et la propagande par l'image*, 18. Emphasis added. Grave did not integrate images into the body of *Les Temps Nouveaux* until 1905, an addition that he later felt had not brought much to the journal. Jean Grave, *Quarante ans de propagande anarchiste*, ed. Mireille Delfau, Paris 1973, 438.

²⁷ See, for example, the opening editorial of *Les Temps nouveaux*. "Temps nouveaux," in: *Les Temps nouveaux* I, no. 1 (4-10 May 1895), 1-2, here 1.

²⁸ "[...] allier la froide raison de l'œuvre de propagande avec la fougue émotionnelle artistique." Jean Grave, "La Thèse dans l'art", in: *Les Temps nouveaux* V, no. 30 (18-24 November 1899), 1-2, here 1.

²⁹ "L'œuvre d'art est une œuvre qui parle à nos sens, exalte nos sentiments, souvent inconsciemment, et de la part de celui qui l'a créée et de la part de celui qui subit son charme." Grave, "La Thèse dans l'art," 1.

³⁰ The letter, signed "Un camarade impressionniste," was published in *La Révolte* on 13 June 1891, with the disclaimer that its opinions diverged from those of the editorial staff on certain points "d'appréciation littéraire." The attribution of the letter to Signac is undisputed, and it has been reproduced as Paul Signac, "Variétés: Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires," in: 48 | *14 La Revue du musée d'Orsay*, no. 12 (Spring 2001), 98-101.

both scientific logic and the emotion of art, ultimately disassociating art's revolutionary import from its subject matter. Opening with an evocation of the recent exhibition of impressionist (i.e. neo-impressionist) painting at the *Salon des Indépendants*, Signac contrasted jeering bourgeois attendees with an "intrigued" proletarian viewership.³¹ He saw the former's dismissal and the latter's interest as indicative of the neo-impressionists' "revolutionary tendency," embodied in their technical innovation: "with a more *logical* and *scientific* placement of tones and colors, they replace outdated methods."³² Though he did link neo-impressionism's revolutionary character with its subject matter, Signac placed more emphasis on the painter's communication of the "purely aesthetic emotion" felt before his subject: in other words, the emotion generated by purely formal means such as line, color and composition. It was this aesthetic emotion that revealed the subject's "unconscious, social character," and its participation in the "great social trial that begins between workers and Capital."³³ It was counterproductive, Signac argued, to demand an explicitly social art, since art's social character "will appear more strongly and eloquently in the pure aesthetes, revolutionaries by temperament, who leave the beaten path to paint what they see, as they feel it, and who very often unconsciously deal a solid blow of the pick to the old social edifice."³⁴

[11] With his emphasis on both the logic and science of the neo-impressionist technique, and the social character of aesthetic emotion, Signac implied that neo-impressionist painting had taken art's revolutionary role even further. By uniting the logic of propaganda with the emotional power associated with art and deed, neo-impressionism constituted an aesthetic act that was a *conscious* "blow of the pick." According to Signac, workers responded with a "sympathetic reserve," a description that evoked both emotion and awareness, and was a far cry from the subjugated viewer later portrayed by Grave.³⁵

³¹ "Il y a quelques semaines, à l'Exposition des artistes Indépendants, [...] devant les toiles des peintres Impressionnistes, on vit s'exclamer les types dont le grand ironiste Forain a si bien saisi l'incurable vulgarité; en revanche, le dimanche, quelques prolétaires intrigués s'intéressèrent." Signac, "Variétés: Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires," 98. Though Signac dismissed Courbet in favor of Millet in this article, his attribution of proletarian spectators to neo-impressionism was similar to the public imagined for Courbet's early painting. See T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, Third ed., Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 1999, 145-154.

³² "Techniquement ils innovent: par une disposition plus logique et plus scientifique des tons et des couleurs, ils remplacent les procédés surannés." Signac, "Variétés: Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires," 98. Emphasis added.

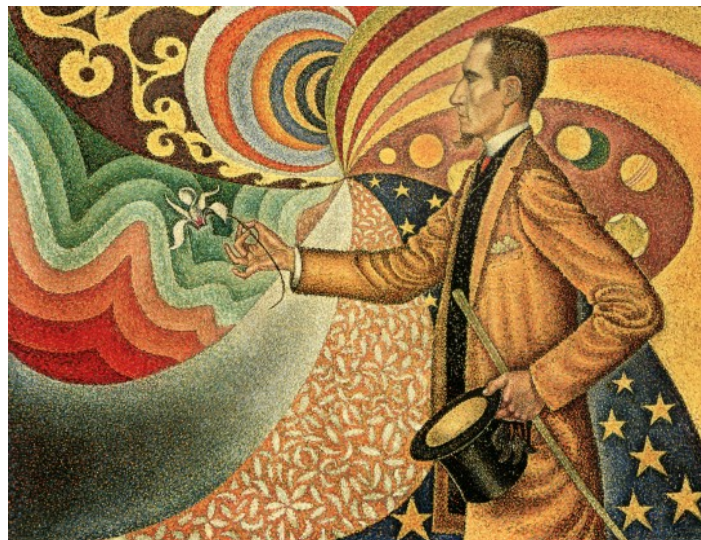
³³ "[...] leurs œuvres, résultant d'une émotion purement esthétique produite par le pittoresque des choses et des restes, ont ce caractère social, inconscient, dont est marquée déjà la littérature contemporaine"; "grand procès social qui s'engage entre les travailleurs et le Capital." Signac, "Variétés: Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires," 99; 101.

³⁴ "[...] se retrouvera beaucoup plus forte et éloquente chez les purs esthètes révolutionnaires par tempérament, qui s'éloignant des sentiers battus, peignent ce qu'ils veulent, comme ils le sentent et donnent inconsciemment, très souvent, un solide coup de pioche au vieil édifice social." Signac, "Variétés: Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires," 101. The translation is John Hutton's., from Hutton, *Neo-impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 251.

³⁵ Signac, "Variétés: Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires," 98.

"Un Félix décoratif"

[12] As the exposition of his artistic and revolutionary convictions, Signac's letter to *La Révolte* implicitly aligned the paintings exhibited at the Independants with revolutionary acts. Signac's own contributions to the show contained none of the suburban, bourgeois or labor imagery of previous years – motifs that could be read explicitly in social terms. Instead, Signac exhibited some landscapes and his astonishing *Portrait de Félix Fénéon*, *Opus 127* (*Sur l'émail d'un fond rythmique de mesures et d'angles, de tons et de teintes, portrait de M. Félix Fénéon en 1890*) (*Portrait of Félix Fénéon, Opus 127 [Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones and Tints, Portrait of Félix Fénéon in 1890]*), 1890-1891 (Fig. 1).³⁶ Decked out with a bright yellow coat, top hat, gloves and cane, Fénéon stares to the left, set in profile against a wheel of decorative, abstract motifs spinning in the opposite direction. In his right hand the critic holds a cyclamen, offering it to someone beyond the frame, or perhaps in homage to the colorful backdrop itself.³⁷



1 Paul Signac, *Portrait de M. Félix Fénéon, Opus 127* (*Portrait of Félix Fénéon, Opus 127*), 1890-1891, oil on canvas, 73.5 x 92.5 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York (© Museum of Modern Art. Reprod. from: Anne Distel, *Signac. 1863-1935*, Paris 2001, p. 203, cat. 51)

[13] Indeed, as the painting's subtitle indicates, this "rhythmic" backdrop is as much the star of the painting as Fénéon (as several critics deplored). Through the abstract motifs, Signac asserted its status as a vector of a "purely aesthetic emotion." Not content with merely bypassing traditional conceptions of painting as representation – as a window – Signac simultaneously referenced and denied the conventions commonly used to establish representational illusion: the white "petals" and stars above Fénéon's right

³⁶ CR 211. Cachin, *Signac: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, 202.

³⁷ Anne Dymond has identified the flower (a motif that is repeated in *Au temps d'harmonie*) with "aesthetic contemplation." Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the Cultural Geography of Mediterranean France," in: *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 2 (June 2003), 353-370, here 361.

arm obey the rules of perspectival recession, but are unmoored from any fuller indication of illusionary space; the green orb punches a "hole" in the swirling, decorative pattern to the right of Fénéon's head.³⁸ This duality of visual effect is echoed in the "wheel," whose curved sections, with their clock-wise orientation, give the impression that the backdrop is endlessly spinning. As these sections taper to a vanishing point they seem to both recede into, and flow out from, their fulcrum.³⁹ All of this serves to emphasize Signac's painting as perpetual aesthetic action rather than fixed representation.⁴⁰

[14] If this action could be said to go beyond the formal, it was thanks in part to the "scientific aesthetic" of Charles Henry, whose influence Signac made clear with the use of the terms "rhythmic," "measures" and "angles."⁴¹ Henry argued that abstract visual elements (notably colors, lines and forms) created pleasurable or painful sensations in the viewing subject. Since Henry tied this pleasure and pain to form's capacity to energize (when "dynamogène") or inhibit the viewing subject, painting could be conceived of as both an *act* and a stimulus *to act*.⁴² This conception of form was well suited to Signac's artistic and revolutionary ambitions. In the portrait he took care to arrange the wheel for dynamogenous effects highlighted by inhibitory accents, in accordance with the idea that "the unpleasant hyperesthetizes [i.e. hypersensitizes]; the pleasant anesthetizes."⁴³ In its attempt to render, through painful sensation, the viewer

³⁸ These observations are Lay's, in Howard G. Lay, "The Aesthetics of Terror: On Signac's Portrait of Fénéon" (unpublished manuscript).

³⁹ The smoke-like yellow arabesques in the upper left corner, for example, enhance the impression of an outwardly flowing movement.

⁴⁰ Martha Ward distinguished the specific "moment," motion and action of the portrait from the calm immobility and containment of Signac's contemporaneous landscapes in Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde*, Chicago 1996, 139-143.

⁴¹ My account of Henry's own work is based primarily on Charles Henry, *Introduction à une esthétique scientifique*, Paris 1885; Charles Henry, *Cercle chromatique: Présentant tous les compléments et toutes les harmonies de couleurs, avec une introduction sur la théorie générale du contraste, du rythme et de la mesure*, Paris 1888; Charles Henry, *Rapporteur esthétique de M. Charles Henry. Notice sur les applications à l'art industriel, à l'histoire de l'art, à l'interprétation de la méthode graphique, en général à l'étude et à la rectification esthétiques de toutes formes*, Paris 1888; Charles Henry, *Harmonies de formes et de couleurs: Démonstrations pratiques avec le rapporteur esthétique et le cercle chromatique (Conférence faite à la bibliothèque municipale professionnelle d'art et d'industrie Forney le 27 mars 1890)*, Paris 1891; José Argüelles, *Charles Henry and the Formation of a Psychophysical Aesthetic*, Chicago 1972; Michael F. Zimmermann, *Les Mondes de Seurat: Son oeuvre et le débat artistique de son temps*, Antwerp 1991. It should be noted that Argüelles's text borders on mysticism.

⁴² Henry identified pleasurable and painful colors and directions – for example, the color red or lines moving upward and to the right as pleasurable – as well as the means to determine pleasurable and painful forms. The increase or decrease in energy caused by form could manifest itself in a variety of ways, ranging from greater or lesser muscular force to stimulated or dampened, even positive or negative, thought. Henry, *Harmonies de formes et de couleurs: Démonstrations pratiques avec le rapporteur esthétique et le cercle chromatique (Conférence faite à la bibliothèque municipale professionnelle d'art et d'industrie Forney le 27 mars 1890)*, 23-26.

⁴³ The portrait's combination of the dynamogenous and the inhibitory has been discussed by Halperin, Argüelles, and Zimmermann. The clock-wise orientation of the wheel (of which the segments were arranged to create pleasantly rhythmic angles) would have been considered dynamogenous, which contrasted with Fénéon's orientation and the largely inhibitory angles associated with his figure. The colors were also arranged so as to juxtapose dynamogenous reds and yellows and oranges with inhibitory blues, greens and purples. Halperin, *Félix Fénéon*,

more sensitive to the painting's harmonious dynamogeny, Fénéon's portrait is arguably the most deed-like of Signac's paintings. Just as anarchist bombs attempted to attack the social structure and inspire revolution, Signac tried to awaken consciousness through a decorative explosion that would deal "a solid blow of the pick to the old social edifice."⁴⁴ One cannot help but see the portrait as the antithesis of the stuffy bourgeois apartment depicted in *Un Dimanche (A Sunday)*, 1888-1890 (Fig. 2), as if the latter's profusion of decorative motifs had exploded from their moorings in rugs and bibelots, coalescing into an enamel wall that is itself perpetually imploding and exploding.⁴⁵

[15] But if the "scientific aesthetic" provided the justification of form-as-act, it also provided the logic, science, and didactic awareness associated with theoretical propaganda. After all, Henry held that form's effects could be predicted and measured, allowing him to deduce, through psychophysics, the universal "laws" of formal expression.⁴⁶ Synthesizing earlier aesthetic theories, Henry endowed the orchestration of aesthetic emotion and sensation with a (supposedly) mathematical, scientific rigor.

Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris, 143-149; Argüelles, *Charles Henry and the Formation of a Psychophysical Aesthetic*, 131-142; Zimmermann, *Les Mondes de Seurat: Son oeuvre et le débat artistique de son temps*, 297. The juxtaposition of dynamogenous and inhibitory colors was considered by Henry to have a dynamogenous result if they were at "rhythmic" intervals on the chromatic circle. See Henry, *Cercle chromatique: Présentant tous les compléments et toutes les harmonies de couleurs, avec une introduction sur la théorie générale du contraste, du rythme et de la mesure*, 36; William Innes Homer, *Seurat and the Science of Painting*, Cambridge 1964, 195-196. "Le désagréable hyperesthésie; l'agréable anesthésie": The phrase was used by Fénéon in a discussion of the practical implications of Henry's ideas, in particular the enhancement of perception through the "ugly". Félix Fénéon, "Signac," in: *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui*, no. 373 (1890), reproduced in Félix Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes: Chroniques d'art*, ed. Joan U. Halperin, vol. 1, Geneva and Paris 1970, 178 (subsequent references are to this edition).

⁴⁴ Howard Lay has implicitly made the analogy between the painting's background and the explosions of anarchist bombs, by discussing both in terms of Fénéon's presence and their attempts to suspend traditional means of signification. Lay, "The Aesthetics of Terror: On Signac's Portrait of Fénéon" (unpublished manuscript). Fénéon would later make the analogy between posters' "couleurs flamboyantes" and dynamite; around the time of the portrait's creation he wrote of paintings by Signac "qui annulent mes murs." "Chez les barbouilleurs: Les affiches en couleur," *Le Père peillard*, 30 april 1893, reproduced in Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes: Chroniques d'art*, 1, 230. Undated [1890] letter from Fénéon to Signac, Signac Archives.

⁴⁵ That was the title it was exhibited under at the 1890 Independants. CR 197. Cachin, *Signac: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, 197. For an analysis of *Un Dimanche*, as well as *La Salle à manger (1886-1887)*, in terms of frivolous consumption and stultifying commodification, see Robyn Roslak, "Artisans, Consumers and Corporeality in Signac's Parisian Interiors," in: *Art History* 29, no. 5 (November 2006), 860-886.

⁴⁶ Henry presented some caveats to these assertions. For example, he constantly reiterated that his designations only applied to the "normal," healthy subject; hence Henry's assertion that his scientific aesthetic could be used to diagnose pathology. See, for example, Henry, *Harmonies de formes et de couleurs: Démonstrations pratiques avec le rapporteur esthétique et le cercle chromatique (Conférence faite à la bibliothèque municipale professionnelle d'art et d'industrie Forney le 27 mars 1890)*, 27. For an analysis of how this conception of pathology infiltrated art critical discourse, see Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde*, 127-131. Psychophysics (or psychophysiology, as it has also been called), emerged in France as early as 1870 as a subset of experimental psychology, which focused on observable psychological phenomena and activities. Psychophysics attempted to access subjective sensorial impressions through knowledge of the physiology of the nervous system. Though Henry's aesthetic also delved into realms beyond psychophysics (such as philosophy and mathematics), it contained this discipline's focus on the body. On the origins and evolution of psychophysics in France, see chapter 1 in Henriette Bloch, *La psychologie scientifique en France*, Paris 2006.



2 Paul Signac, *Un Dimanche (A Sunday)*, 1888-90, oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Private Collection (© Archives Signac. Reprod. from: Françoise Cachin, Signac. *Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre*, Paris 2000, p. 27, cat. 197)

[16] The search for a science of art had motivated Signac's original adoption, along with Georges Seurat (1859-1891), of the neo-impressionist technique, and when writing on the movement in 1886, Fénéon attributed the division of color to a scientific understanding of the behavior of light, pigment, and their effect on the eye.⁴⁷ But Henry's aesthetic shifted the emphasis from an empiricist justification of neo-impressionist *facture* to one that originated in the artwork itself: formal elements, independent of what they might represent, became a sure, effective and universal means of determining aesthetic emotion. In his 1899 *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme*, Signac emphasized the term "divisionism" over that of "pointillism," distinguishing the formal purity, contrast, and harmony of the former from the latter's slavish imitation of nature.⁴⁸ This distinction confirmed Signac's preoccupation with the psychophysical impact, rather than the representational empiricism, of his technique.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ See, in particular, "Les Impressionnistes en 1886," in: *La Vogue* (October 1886), reproduced in Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes: Chroniques d'art*, 1, 27-45. The notion of "optical mixture," in which separated pigments recomposed themselves as a more luminous color/light in the viewer's eye, was already well-suited to psychophysics' emphasis on subjective effects (see page 36).

⁴⁸ "*Diviser, c'est rechercher la puissance et l'harmonie de la couleur, en représentant la lumière colorée par ses éléments purs, et en employant le mélange optique de ces éléments purs séparés et dosés selon les lois essentielles du contraste et de la dégradation [...] Pointiller [...] [c]'est couvrir une surface de petites touches multicolores rapprochées, pures out ternes, en s'efforçant d'imiter, par le mélange optique de ces éléments multipliés, les teintes variés de la nature, sans aucune volonté d'équilibre, sans aucun souci de contraste.*" Signac portrayed pointillists as artists who misunderstood the purposes of divisionism. He distanced the neo-impressionists from a pointillist focus on nature, though Fénéon's early writing on the movement indicates that a more accurate representation of nature was at least one of its initial goals. Paul Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme*, ed. Françoise Cachin, Paris 1978, 119-120. The text amounted to a manifesto for, and a defense of, neo-impressionism.

⁴⁹ Signac's emphasis on the "logical and scientific *placement* [...] of tones and colors" identified the technique entirely with the arrangement of color on canvas, as opposed to its initial justification as the reproduction of empirical light effects. Signac, "Variétés: Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires,"

[17] The "scientific aesthetic" was also an attempt to make form's unconscious effects accessible to consciousness. Henry wrote treatises explaining his theories and their practical application, which he accompanied with instruments – among them a "chromatic circle" and an "aesthetic protractor" – designed to help determine the psychophysical valence of colors and forms.⁵⁰ When Signac used these instruments in the creation of illustrations, calculations and promotional works for Henry's lectures and publications, he was hoping to increase aesthetic awareness, enabling viewers to apply logic and reason to aesthetic emotion.⁵¹ In Fénéon's portrait (Fig. 1), the citation of Henry's terminology and the use of abstract forms indicated the same didactic impulse. Signac had added another system to that of divisionism: decorative patterns and motifs, manifesting as explicitly as possible the "laws" of linear expression.⁵²

[18] The "decorative" character of Fénéon's portrait, to which I have alluded thus far only in passing, was therefore about more than the abstracted forms in its background, or their affinities with patterns and shapes found in the decorative arts. When proposing the portrait to Fénéon in reciprocation for the latter's flattering profile in *Les Hommes d'Aujourd'hui* (which included a discussion of Signac's collaboration with Henry), Signac implicitly aligned "decorative" aesthetics with psychophysical aesthetics. He wrote: "It will in no way be a banal portrait, but rather a very composed picture, very arranged in

98. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰ On Henry's version of the chromatic circle the colors were arranged so that pleasurable colors corresponded to pleasurable directions, and vice versa (for example, red, as the most agreeable color, was on top); the aesthetic protractor was for measuring angles, thereby determining whether a form was rhythmic (and thus harmonious) or not. These instruments, produced as plates or inserts within the relevant treatises, were meant to aid figures ranging from doctors and engineers to artists, critics and artisans in the analysis and/or creation of form. Henry's instruments are discussed in Homer, *Seurat and the Science of Painting*, 190-198; Zimmermann, *Les Mondes de Seurat: Son oeuvre et le débat artistique de son temps*, 265-275.

⁵¹ In an 1890 conference before furniture makers from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, Henry used figures created by Signac (of sword guards and vases, for example). Henry, *Harmonies de formes et de couleurs: Démonstrations pratiques avec le rapporteur esthétique et le cercle chromatique (Conférence faite à la bibliothèque municipale professionnelle d'art et d'industrie Forney le 27 mars 1890)*. Signac wrote to Vincent Van Gogh, "Cela aura une grande portée sociale au point de vue surtout de l'art industriel. Nous apprenons à voir juste et beau aux ouvriers apprentis, etc. dont jusqu'ici on n'a fait l'éducation esthétique qu'au moyen de formules empiriques et de conseils malhonnêtes ou niais." Paul Signac, "Letter to Vincent Van Gogh. Cassis, Friday, 12 April 1889 (Letter 757)," *Vincent Van Gogh, The Letters*(1889), <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let757/letter.html> (accessed 4 January 2010). Signac's calculations and figures were later published in Charles Henry, *Quelques aperçus sur l'Esthétique des formes*, Paris 1895. Signac's creation of a poster for Henry's *Cercle chromatique* (upon which he based a later print) was noted in two articles by Fénéon, including "L'affiche de M. Paul Signac. Octobre (14, boulevard Saint-Michel)" in *La Revue indépendante's* 1888 "Calendrier de Septembre." Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes: Chroniques d'art*, 1, 117.

⁵² Signac did not necessarily appreciate the term "system." In a 14 april 1897 journal entry he wrote that "[l]a division est plutôt une philosophie qu'un système," though he also used the term when describing divisionism in his D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impresionisme: "La division, c'est un système complexe d'harmonie, une esthétique plutôt qu'une technique." Paul Signac, "Extraits du Journal inédit de Paul Signac II, 1897-1898," in: *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 39 (1952), 265-284, here 267; Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impresionisme*, 119. My use of the term is meant to highlight the explicit application of divisionism and Henry's aesthetic.

lines and tints [...] A decorative Félix."⁵³ Decorative painting, I argue, was Signac's attempt to produce, logically and transparently, harmonious sensation. Decorative form was well-suited to this task because of the adjective's polysemy, which simultaneously invoked: 1) the self-sufficiency of pure form, denuded of any representational function; 2) the "purely aesthetic emotion" produced by these abstracted elements; and 3) the unconscious, universal principles that governed harmonious formal expression.⁵⁴ Henry's aesthetic represented an attempt at the conscious recuperation of these instinctive principles.

[19] The connection of decorative painting with visual harmony was particularly appropriate to Henry's ideas on psychophysical and social harmony, which echoed anarchist visions of free individuals living in collective harmony.⁵⁵ According to Henry, "to help the normal development of art is also to further the realization of our still far-off destiny – the creation of universal harmony."⁵⁶ In a profile of Signac for *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui* – which had generated the idea for the portrait – Fénéon highlighted a similar concept in relation to decoration, that of synthesis.⁵⁷ Henry distanced harmony from the present by projecting it into a far-off future; in a passage that Robyn Roslak has

⁵³ Fénéon, "Signac," 174-179. "Ce ne serait point un banal portrait mais un tableau très composé, très agencé en lignes et teintes [...] Un Félix décoratif." Letter from Signac to Fénéon, Saint-Briac, 21 July 1890, Signac Archives.

⁵⁴ For the association of these qualities with decorative painting, see Nicholas Watkins, "The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic," in: *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890-1930*, ed. Gloria Groom, New Haven and London 2001, 1-28, here 1-6; Roger Benjamin, "The Decorative Landscape, Fauvism and the Arabesque of Observation," in: *Art Bulletin* 75, no. 2 (June 1993); Joyce Henri Robinson, "'Hi Honey, I'm Home': Weary (Neurasthenic) Businessmen and the Formulation of a Serenely Modern Aesthetic," in: *What is Architecture?*, ed. Andrew Ballantyne, New York 2002, 112-128, here 114-119. See the discussion of aesthetic emotion in [para. 10](#) above.

⁵⁵ Critics such as Alphonse Germain and Georges Lecomte tied the expressive "harmonie des lignes et des couleurs" to decorative painting. See, for example, Georges Lecomte, "Société des artistes indépendants," in: *L'Art moderne* 10 (30 March 1890), 100-101. This connection was based, in part, on Henry's own association of his aesthetic with the abstract motifs and forms of the decorative arts, as well as the formal qualities associated with a prior discourse on mural painting. *Liste des travaux de M. Charles Henry*, Rome October 1880, 6; Marie Jeannine Aquilino, "Painted Promises: The Politics of Public Art in Late Nineteenth-Century France," in: *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 4 (December 1993), 697-712; Watkins, "The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic," 1-6. Germain's conception of decorative painting has been analyzed by both Benjamin and Robinson (see preceding footnote).

⁵⁶ "[...] aider le développement normal de l'art c'est favoriser d'autant la réalisation encore lointaine de notre destinée – la création de l'harmonie universelle." Henry, *Rapporteur esthétique de M. Charles Henry. Notice sur les applications à l'art industriel, à l'histoire de l'art, à l'interprétation de la méthode graphique, en général à l'étude et à la rectification esthétiques de toutes formes*, 15. Zimmermann has argued that Henry's rhetoric, particularly given the fact that the psychophysicist's stance on anarchism was unclear, bears just as strong a resemblance to bourgeois hopes for harmony between classes (while maintaining that class structure). Zimmermann, *Les Mondes de Seurat: Son oeuvre et le débat artistique de son temps*, 282. Nevertheless, the notion of humanity's progress toward greater and greater harmony closely echoes ideas expressed in *La Révolte* in the same period: "après une révolution qui nous aura débarrassé de nos entraves, l'humanité pourra continuer plus rapidement son évolution vers la bienveillance mutuelle. La Révolution ne transformera pas les individus, mais en modifiant la nature de leurs relations, un changement important se fera dans les caractères, un grand pas dans la marche vers la solidarité." "Communisme et individualisme," in: *La Révolte: Organe communiste-anarchiste* I, no. 22 (18-24 February 1888), 1-2, here 2.

argued is critical to an understanding of Signac's artistic ambitions, Fénéon associated decorative synthesis with material and temporal transcendence.⁵⁸ The critic wrote that once the neo-impressionist technique of optical mixture had provided a vehicle for the artist's latent qualities:

M. Paul Signac was able to create exemplary specimens of an art of great decorative development, which sacrifices anecdote to arabesque, nomenclature to synthesis, the fleeting to the permanent, and [...] confers on Nature, which at last grew weary of its precarious reality, an authentic Reality.⁵⁹

[20] The use of the term "synthesis" here implies the transcendence of disparate elements (the enumeration of nomenclature), including antitheses.⁶⁰ Dialectic was in fact central to Seurat's notion of harmony: "Art is harmony, Harmony is the analogy of Opposites, the analogy of Similarities – of tone, tint and line."⁶¹ Yet, unless they wished to criticize neo-impressionist painting, critics largely emphasized an overall decorative unity, which they associated with a harmony of repose; in the words of Fénéon, "a harmonious and nostalgic dream in light."⁶² With its profusion of contrasts, the Fénéon portrait seems designed for anything but. In addition to the imploding/exploding backdrop, and the contrast of dynamogenous and inhibitory angles, directions, and colors, Signac juxtaposed the figure of Fénéon and the abstract, "rhythmic background." The juxtaposition resulted in the pairing of an esoteric, private joke – indicated by

⁵⁷ For the entwined concepts of harmony, analysis and synthesis, see Roslak, "The Politics of Aesthetic Harmony: Neo-Impressionism, Science, and Anarchism," particularly 388-389. Synthesis was the greater unity formed out of disparate elements (determined by analysis).

⁵⁸ For Roslak, this is a key passage, indicative of neo-impressionism's idealizing impulse. Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France: Painting, Politics and Landscape*, 1-5; Robyn Roslak, "Symphonic Seas, Oceans of Liberty: Paul Signac's *La Mer: Les Barques (Concarneau)*," in: *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2005), <http://19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/component/content/article/64-spring05article/302-symphonic-seas-oceans-of-liberty-paul-signacs-la-mer-les-barques-concarneau> (accessed 16 December 2011).

⁵⁹ "M. Paul Signac put créer les exemplaires spécimens d'un art à grand développement décoratif, qui sacrifie l'anecdote à l'arabesque, la nomenclature à la synthèse, le fugace au permanent, et [...] confère à la Nature, que lassait à la fin sa réalité précaire, une authentique Réalité." Fénéon, "Signac," 177. The translation is Roslak's (see preceding footnote).

⁶⁰ From the beginning the neo-impressionist technique highlighted the dual process of analysis and synthesis, which was fused with Henry's theories of formal expression, in which harmony was determined by the combined processes of addition and subtraction. Roslak has highlighted the concept of analysis rather than antithesis or dialectic. Roslak, "The Politics of Aesthetic Harmony: Neo-Impressionism, Science, and Anarchism." Fénéon's text was in fact sensitive to the importance of contrast, but he subordinated it to the narrative of synthesis.

⁶¹ "L'Art c'est l'harmonie, l'Harmonie c'est l'analogie des Contraires, l'analogie des Semblables – de ton, de teinte, de ligne." As reported by Jules Christophe, "Georges Seurat," in: *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui* 9, no. 368 (1890). A similar formulation can be found in Seurat's "Esthétique," which consists of a series of four drafts for a letter (that was never sent) to the critic Maurice Beaubourg. They are reproduced or summarized in Robert L. Herbert et al., *Georges Seurat, 1859-1891*, New York 1991, 381-84. My translation is based on Herbert's: Robert L. Herbert, *Seurat, Drawings and Paintings*, New Haven 2001, 170-171. Herbert explains that "'Ton' and 'teinte' have been translated by their nineteenth-century equivalents 'tone' and 'tint,' although today many would say 'value' and 'hue' (the latter, however, is not the same as 'tint,' which incorporates the idea of a degree of saturation as distinct from pure chroma)."

⁶² "[...] un harmonieux et nostalgique rêve dans de la lumière." "Paul Signac," *La Plume* (1 September 1891), reproduced in Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes: Chroniques d'art*, 1, 199.

Fénéon's bright yellow coat, bizarre pose and obscurely symbolic flower – and an explicit exposition of theory.⁶³ Signac also opposed small, isolated motifs in the lower-right corner (around Fénéon's body) with curved and flowing lines in the upper-left corner, where the patterns seem to roil in response to Fénéon's proffered cyclamen. In this light, the background becomes a decorative balancing act, a dialectical harmony conjured up and controlled by Fénéon.

[21] This balancing act reflected Signac's own juggling of a complex dialectic. On the one hand, there were the individualized freedoms of pure aesthetics, of color and emotion, and of artistic "deed." Anarchist theorists like Grave associated these elements with an art of the ideal future rather than of an engaged present, arguing that current efforts needed to be directed at collective awareness.⁶⁴ On the other hand, Signac attempted to make individual artistic freedom relevant to the present by endowing it with the qualities of propaganda. His aesthetic theories were given concrete form as explicit, didactic formal systems, namely divisionism and abstract linearity. With his decorative "enamel" – particularly its decorative patterns, which most explicitly combined the aesthetic and the didactic – Signac attempted to bridge the gap between individual and collective emancipation, present struggle and future anarchist harmony. The portrait's decorative backdrop both explodes and suspends the explosion; when Fénéon wrote that Signac's paintings erased his walls, Signac responded with a constructive metaphor, asking if there were another painting "that would fill a hole in the gallery of my friend Fénéon."⁶⁵ With his art, Signac strove for a harmonious alternative to terrorist bombs. Which raises the following questions: is Fénéon in control of the backdrop's decorative im/explosion, or is he just an observer to a process set in motion? Does the portrait synthesize into an overall harmony, containing the various forces it brings to bear?

[22] For the most part, the response of commentators was an emphatic no. Georges Lecomte had already remarked in 1890 that "[t]his search for the harmony of lines and colors, for the clear expression, even exaggeration, of the painting's dominant idea, will result in powerful effects of decorative painting, provided that one manages to dissimulate the too apparent procedure."⁶⁶ Aside from the disjunction between the figure

⁶³ Such elements have led Marina Feretti-Bocquillon to propose the portrait as a gentle mockery of Henry's scientific aesthetic, one verging on parody. Anne Distel et al., eds., *Signac, 1863-1935*, exh. cat., Paris 2001, 202-205.

⁶⁴ Grave criticized exclusively aesthetic concerns as resulting in an art for art's sake, which he believed negated art's potential for social engagement. Grave, *La société future*, 357-368.

⁶⁵ Fénéon wrote admiringly of paintings by Signac "qui annulent mes murs"; Signac responded by asking if there were another painting "qui boucherait un trou dans la galerie de mon ami Fénéon." Undated [1890] letter from Fénéon to Signac, response of 29 April 1890 from Signac to Fénéon, Signac Archives.

⁶⁶ "Cette recherche de l'harmonie des lignes et des couleurs, pour l'expression nette jusqu'à l'exagération de l'idée dominante du tableau, aboutira à des effets puissants de peinture décorative, pour peu qu'on arrive à dissimuler le trop apparent procédé." Lecomte, "Société des artistes indépendants," 100-101.

and background, the most criticized aspect of the painting was the emphatic concretization of divisionism and Henry's theories. For viewers ranging from Adolphe Retté to Camille Pissarro (both anarchists, but of a very different stamp) these systems impeded formal synthesis and its corollary, aesthetic emotion. Retté compared neo-impression negatively with the "decorative composition" and "synthesis" of symbolist painters like Pierre Bonnard and Maurice Denis, arguing that Signac's work provided a merely visual pleasure (*sensation*) absent of ideas and emotions.⁶⁷ Pissarro condemned the portrait for the absence of both sensation and decorative, aesthetic emotion.⁶⁸ Signac had viewed explicit decorative pattern as his surest means for achieving both aesthetic and didactic ends, but those same patterns stretched the dialectic to breaking point. Viewers like Lecomte, Retté and Pissarro required of decorative painting a more uniform, synthetic harmony – the kind designated by Fénéon's "authentic Reality."⁶⁹

[23] Fénéon kept the portrait, but apparently dismissed it late in life.⁷⁰ And around the time of its creation, he provided subtle dissuasions from theoretical excess. While editing the profile of Signac in which the passage on decorative, authentic Reality appeared, Fénéon railed against Henry's theoretical precisions, complaining to Signac that "We are in a studio, not in a laboratory."⁷¹ Then, in the published article, the critic implied that Henry's aesthetic was too crude a tool for the execution or analysis of Signac's paintings.⁷² The following year, Fénéon wrote that "[Signac] has not enslaved himself to this graceful mathematics; he knows well that a work of art is inextricable."⁷³ Fénéon

⁶⁷ Adolphe Retté, "Septième exposition des artistes indépendants," in: *l'Ermitage* (May 1891), 293-301, here 293; 295. Retté would later become a monarchist, perhaps not surprising given the elitist tone of his and others' contributions to *l'Ermitage*.

⁶⁸ "Un portrait bizarre de Fénéon debout, tendant un lys, et comme fond, des entrelacs de couleurs qui ne sont pas décoratifs, qui ne s'expliquent pas au point de vue de la sensation et qui ne donnent pas non plus une sensation de beauté décorative à l'œuvre." Letter to Lucien Pissarro, March 30, 1891 (#647). Camille Pissarro, *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, ed. Janine Bailly-Herzberg, vol. 3, Paris 1988, 50.

⁶⁹ See [para. 19](#) above.

⁷⁰ For Fénéon's negative view of the portrait, see Halperin, *Félix Fénéon, Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, 147. She also argued that Fénéon had an ambivalent attitude to the application of Henry's aesthetic in painting, pp. 125-31. Based on the fact that Fénéon kept the portrait all his life, Marina Feretti-Bocquillon has implied, in contrast, that Fénéon prized this painting. Distel et al., *Signac, 1863-1935*, 204.

⁷¹ "Nous sommes dans un atelier, pas dans un laboratoire." Undated letter [April 1890] from Fénéon to Signac, Signac Archives. Quoted in Distel et al., *Signac, 1863-1935*, 51. A collection of letters from Henry to Fénéon, including one with the suggested corrections that irritated Fénéon, is conserved at the Bibliothèque de la Sorbonne.

⁷² "Cette méthode permettrait peut-être l'étude mathématique de chromoxylographies japonaises aux teintes autonomes dans leurs confins nettement délinées. Mais il serait illusoire que M. Signac cherchât à l'utiliser pour l'exécution d'un tableau ou M. X. pour l'analyse ultérieure de ce tableau." Fénéon, "Signac," 178. Interestingly, the backdrop for the portrait was adapted from just the type of Japanese print Fénéon described. For the identification of a Japanese wood-block print (possibly a kimono pattern) as the iconographical source, see Françoise Cachin, "Le Portrait de Fénéon par Signac: Une Source inédite," in: *La Revue de l'art*, no. 6 (1969), 90-91.

⁷³ "[Signac] ne s'est pas asservi à cette mathématique gracieuse; il sait bien qu'une œuvre d'art est inextricable." "Paul Signac," *La Plume* (1 September 1891), reproduced in Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes: Chroniques d'art*, 1, 198.

acknowledged that Signac's study of Henry's aesthetic seemed to have given him more control over "his intuitions of polychromic and linear harmonies," allowing him to reach "the threshold of consciousness."⁷⁴ But note the terms "inextricable," "intuition," and "threshold": the critic accepts Henry's aesthetic insofar as it helps clarify and communicate the intuitions of artistic genius; if given too central a role, it might evacuate aesthetic instinct and emotion. This balance of instinctive aesthetics and theoretical awareness would certainly have appealed to Signac, and his reaction to Fénéon's 1890 article was unreservedly enthusiastic.⁷⁵ Yet I do not think that Signac – who at this time included a date in all his paintings' titles and wrote of "the vanity of inalterable processes" – would have fully embraced the transcendence of the "fleeting," "precarious" present entailed by Fénéon's "authentic Reality."⁷⁶ As I have already indicated, Signac's portrait of Fénéon resisted synthesis even as it proposed it. It resisted synthesis too much for most viewers, resulting in rupture rather than harmony, and incomprehension rather than awareness and understanding.

[24] This reaction, combined with the shock of Seurat's death, must have shaken Signac's confidence in his ability to join reason and aesthetic emotion.⁷⁷ Henry's aesthetic had also been challenged, and three years later a rather dismissive journal entry suggests that Signac had washed his hands of the psychophysicist.⁷⁸ Yet, rather than abandoning Henry's ideas, Signac was convinced by critics that his theoretical frameworks (articulated through divisionism and decorative pattern) had to be further sublimated in favor of decorative unity, and that intuition, rather than calculations, needed to dominate.⁷⁹ The abstract background of the Fénéon portrait had proved to be a problem. Critics read it as the oppressive yoke of an all "too apparent procedure," while anarchists outside of avant-garde circles would have read it as an esoteric exercise devoid of revolutionary import.⁸⁰ Signac could address both complaints by grounding his

⁷⁴ "[...] ses intuitions d'harmonies polychromes et linéaires"; "le seuil de la conscience." Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes: Chroniques d'art*, 1, 178; 198.

⁷⁵ Letter from Signac to Fénéon, 29 April 1890, quoted in Halperin, *Félix Fénéon, Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, 134; Distel et al., *Signac, 1863-1935*, 51.

⁷⁶ "[...] la vanité des procédés immuables." Signac, "Variétés: Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires," 101.

⁷⁷ Seurat died suddenly and unexpectedly on 29 March 1891, shortly after the opening of the Independants.

⁷⁸ "Visite de Charles Henry, de plus en plus poétique. D'une donnée exacte et scientifique, il tire des conclusions d'une fantaisie charmante qu'il s'efforce de démontrer mathématiquement." 14 December 1894, Signac, "Extraits du Journal inédit de Paul Signac I, 1894-1895," 112.

Zimmermann has attributed Signac's eventual estrangement from Henry to the discrediting, in the 1890s, of his psychophysical aesthetic on scientific and philosophical grounds (accomplished largely by the philosophers Georges Sorel and Henri Bergson, though only the former attacked Henry directly). Zimmermann, *Les Mondes de Seurat: Son oeuvre et le débat artistique de son temps*, 243-248.

⁷⁹ For an indication of Signac's continued adherence to Henry's ideas, see "Le sujet en peinture et la signification du tableau, 1935," text reproduced in annex in Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impersonnisme*, 185.

⁸⁰ See note 66.

work in nature and, to a lesser extent, anarchist iconography, subject matter that would serve as alibis for the deployment of his aesthetic systems.

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Decorative Painting in the "*Ère des attentats*"

[25] In March 1892 a series of bombings struck Paris, ushering in the *ère des attentats*. In that same period, Signac began an extended voyage along the French coast, beginning in Brittany and culminating in May with his arrival at Saint-Tropez. This idyllic setting provided Signac with both an outsider's view on Parisian turmoil and a concrete example of the individual liberty and mutual aid promised by anarcho-communism.⁸¹ This combination inspired two large-scale decorative works, *Femmes au puits* (Fig. 3) and *Au temps d'harmonie* (Fig. 4), both of which were harmonious alternatives to anarchist bombs.

[26] If Signac decided to reaffirm his anarchist engagement in the realm of paint, it was because the "great social trial that begins between workers and Capital" seemed to be coming to a head. The following year he wrote to Grave of "the hope of this near future when, finally, for the first time, all individuality will be free."⁸² Grave's *La Révolte* had separated rational propaganda and emotional deed, arguing that the latter would have to wait for a "time of revolution."⁸³ But violent terrorism could be interpreted as the stirrings of a future cataclysm. Propaganda seemed on the verge of achieving its own desired transcendence as revolutionary act. As Reclus wrote in *La Plume*:

Each day could bring catastrophe, and the situation is so tense that in each country we are waiting for a burst, who knows, maybe the first flare of the explosion! [...] It's that the feeling of solidarity grows to such an extent that each local shock tends to shake all of Humanity. Thus great days are on the horizon. The evolution is complete, and the revolution will not be long in coming. Is it not accomplishing itself in multiple shocks right before our eyes? [...] *The day will come when Evolution and Revolution follow immediately upon one another, from desire to reality, idea to realization, merging as one, single phenomenon.*⁸⁴

⁸¹ Anne Dymond, Robyn Roslak, and Tania Woloshyn have pointed to the special connection between anarchist theory, geography and the idealization of Southern France as a site of traditional communities approximating anarchist social structures. Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the Cultural Geography of Mediterranean France"; Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France: Painting, Politics and Landscape*, particularly Chapter 6; Tania Woloshyn, "Vers la lumière: Painters and Patients on the Côte d'Azur, c.1887-1910" (University of Nottingham, 2008), 205-263, as well as her article in this Special Issue, "[Colonizing the Côte d'Azur: Neo-Impressionism, Anarcho-Communism and the Tropical *Terre Libre* of the Maures, c.1892-1908.](#)"

⁸² "[...] l'espérance de cet avenir proche où, enfin, pour la première fois, toute individualité sera libre." Undated letter [1893] from Signac to Jean Grave (thanking him for and praising his *La Société mourante et l'anarchie*, published in Paris that year), reproduced in Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac and Others II," 519.

⁸³ "Lutte et théorie," 2.

⁸⁴ "Chaque jour peut amener une catastrophe et la situation est tellement tendue que dans chaque pays on s'attend à un éclat, qui sait ? peut-être la première fusée de l'explosion ! [...] C'est que le sentiment de solidarité gagne de plus en plus et que toute secousse locale tend à ébranler l'Humanité. [...] Ainsi les grands jours s'annoncent. L'évolution s'est faite, la révolution ne saurait tarder. D'ailleurs ne s'accomplit-elle pas constamment sous nos yeux par multiples secousses? [...] Le jour viendra où l'Evolution et la Révolution se succédant immédiatement du désir au fait, de

[27] At such a time, as he was fleshing out the idea for *Au temps d'harmonie*, Signac was able to see aesthetic and anarchist engagement as the same project.⁸⁵ The moment when "purely aesthetic emotion" would be accessible to all seemed imminent, and a reasoned artistic propaganda could help bring it closer.⁸⁶

[28] Signac envisioned artistic interventions that would engender none of the reservations directed at "propaganda by the deed." While Fénéon considered Émile Henry's bombing of the Café Terminus to be the most logical of the *attentats*, fellow anarchist and *littérateur* Octave Mirbeau expressed the opinion of many when he charged that it was "inexplicable."⁸⁷ With the killing of innocent café patrons, Mirbeau feared that Henry had muddied the anarchist "idea" with the gratuitous violence of an "isolated criminal."⁸⁸ And, echoing Grave's own doubts, the poet Stéphane Mallarmé emphasized the deed's ephemerality as propaganda:

Explosive devices – the detonation of which illuminates parliaments with a *summary* glow, but that maims, just as regrettably, the curious onlooker – would interest me for the glow they produce, were it not for the *brevity of its lesson*, which permits the legislator to claim a definitive lack of understanding; but I question the addition of bullets and nails to these devices.⁸⁹

[29] Signac turned to decorative painting to render, with the force of psychophysical harmony, the collective justice, beauty and happiness that Mirbeau associated with Grave's anarcho-communism.⁹⁰ He also wanted to make *enduring* anarchist lessons. Seurat's death inspired in Signac an ongoing reflection on the legacy of his work and of

l'idée à la réalisation, se confondront en un seul et même phénomène." Élisée Reclus, "La Révolution," in: *La Plume: Littéraire, artistique, et sociale*, no. 97 (1 May 1893), 206-207, here 207. Emphasis added.

⁸⁵ For details of the elaboration of both *Femmes au puits* and *Au temps d'harmonie*, see Distel et al., *Signac, 1863-1935*, 226-228; 241-245; Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon, "Peintures," in: Françoise Cachin, Jean-Paul Monerey, and Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon, eds., *Signac & Saint-Tropez, 1892-1913*, exh. cat., Saint-Tropez 1992, 29-83, here 32-36; 50-51.

⁸⁶ See [para. 10](#) above.

⁸⁷ Octave Mirbeau, "Pour Jean Grave," *Le Journal* (19 February 1894), reproduced in: *Combats politiques*, ed. Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet, Paris 1990, 141-147, here 141.

⁸⁸ "Tout est à craindre, car se trouvent confondues dans une même haine, et la bombe du criminel isolé, et l'idée qui marche, impassible et lente, à travers les siècles." Mirbeau, "Pour Jean Grave," 146.

⁸⁹ "Les engins, dont le bris illumine les parlements d'une lueur sommaire, mais estropient, aussi à faire grand'pitié, des badauds, je m'y intéresserais, en raison de la lueur – sans la brièveté de son enseignement qui permet au législateur d'alléguer une définitive incompréhension; mais j'y récuse l'adjonction de balles à tir et de clous." Stéphane Mallarmé, "La musique et les lettres: lecture d'Oxford et de Cambridge," in: *La revue blanche* 30 (April 1894), 307. Emphasis added. Discussed and translated in Lay, "Beau Geste! (On the Readability of Terrorism)," 94-95. This passage is placed in relation to Mallarmé's reception of anarchist terrorism in Patrick McGuinness, "Mallarmé and the Poetics of Explosion," in: *MLN* 124, no. 4 (September 2009), 797-824. McGuinness argues that Mallarmé's poetry recuperated the violent explosions of the *attentats* as a positive, constructive force by transmuting them into aesthetic explosions, "poésie éclatée." As I have indicated, this view of Mallarmé is equally appropriate for Signac.

⁹⁰ "Ce qui éclate dans ce livre [*La société mourante et l'anarchie*], c'est l'amour de la vie, c'est-à-dire la justice et la pitié. Même si, de-ci, de-là, il contient des parties de pur rêve, ce rêve est beau, puisqu'il poursuit le bonheur." Mirbeau, "Pour Jean Grave," 146.

neo-impressionism, a concern that also informed his political engagement.⁹¹ When seeking to represent and enact anarchist harmony, Signac looked for permanence in large-scale decorative painting; he also ended his practice of including dates in the exhibition titles of his works.⁹² These changes oriented Signac's painting more fully toward Fénéon's "authentic Reality," but the artist did not neglect his work's capacity to serve as a timely – as opposed to merely timeless – lesson.⁹³ Rather, he attempted to give future harmony a foothold in the present.

Femmes au puits

[30] Signac's first Saint-Tropez-inspired decoration was painted at the end of that year and exhibited in 1893. Its (undated) title proclaimed Signac's decorative ambitions: *Femmes au puits. Décoration pour un panneau dans la pénombre (Women at the Well. Decoration for a panel in half-light)*, 1892 (Fig. 3).⁹⁴ The emphasis on a unified surface – a "panel" rather than an accumulation, as in the Fénéon portrait, of individualized "tints" or "angles" – indicated Signac's increased focus on an overall harmony. In this painting, he integrated decorative patterns with the landscape and figures: the most emphatic curves and patterns double as the foreground shadow, the ascending path, the folds of a skirt or the women's arms. In a May 1893 letter to Henri-Edmond Cross (1856-1910), Signac made it clear that he was trying to create an ensemble in which the subject and patterns ("contours") were ultimately transcended by light.⁹⁵ Luminous intensity was the other preoccupation highlighted by the subtitle, for *Femmes au puits* was meant to create its own light in a darkened space. Having revisited paintings by Seurat in the "gentle light" of his mother's apartment, Signac would later confirm that neo-impressionist "painting [...] does not need a great deal of light since it creates its own."⁹⁶ Signac intended his

⁹¹ Though these concerns were already present as early as 1890, as witnessed in a letter to Henri-Edmond Cross. "Dégoûté des couleurs à l'huile trop changeantes, je vais essayer de peindre à l'encaustique à chaud – Lefranc va préparer des couleurs immuables!" December 1890 letter to Cross, cited by Ferretti-Bocquillon in Distel et al., *Signac, 1863-1935*, 211. Charles Henry had co-authored a treatise on encaustic painting in 1884: Henry Cros and Charles Henry, *L'Encaustique et les autres procédés de peinture chez les anciens: Histoire et technique*, Paris 1884. Cros was a sculptor affiliated with official decorative arts institutions.

⁹² Signac seems to have dispensed with dates in his titles starting with *Femme se coiffant, Opus 227 (arabesques pour une salle de toilette)* (CR 221), a decorative painting intended for a private interior. Signac exhibited this painting, in which he tried out the "immutable" encaustic technique, twice in 1892. Cachin, *Signac: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, 206.

⁹³ See [para. 19](#) above.

⁹⁴ CR 234. Cachin, *Signac: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, 210-211.

⁹⁵ Referring to Charles Angrand's critique that the painting possibly suffered because the figures and the landscape were of equal importance, neither subordinated to the other, Signac wrote that this had been his goal: "ni figures, ni paysages! Un unsemble de lumière, un tout de soleil. J'ai même évité le plus possible les contours." Undated letter from Signac to Henri-Edmond Cross [May 1893], Signac Archives. Reproduced in Ferretti-Bocquillon, *Signac & Saint-Tropez, 1892-1913*, 32, n.3. The relevant April 1893 letter from Angrand is reproduced in Charles Angrand, *Correspondances, 1883-1926*, ed. François Lespinasse, Rouen 1988, 57.

⁹⁶ "C'est de la lumière douce et harmonieuse qui est accrochée sur ces murs [of Mme Seurat's apartment]. On ne sent pas du tout la facture. Tout le côté gênant du métier disparaît – et reste seul le bénéfice de lumière et d'harmonie. Je crois qu'une lumière douce d'appartement est très

painting as a luminous intervention, a vehicle for harmony (the term which came to subsume Henry's aesthetic) independent of its surroundings.



3 Paul Signac, *Femmes au puits*. Opus 238 (*Women at the Well*. Opus 238), 1892, oil on canvas, 195 x 131cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris (© RMN Musée d'Orsay. Reprod. from: Françoise Cachin, *Signac. Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre*, Paris 2000, p. 110, cat. 234)

[31] Light, of course, was also a firmly established metaphor for revolutionary enlightenment or awakening.⁹⁷ With *Femmes au puits*, Signac's didactic intentions manifested themselves not only in color and line, but also in the beginnings of an (obliquely) anarchist iconography. As Anne Dymond has shown, the Provençal women at the communal well were both an illustration and a symbol of mutual aid and collective resources.⁹⁸ She has argued that, in addition to identifying these women with the region, Signac anchored them in the modern present by avoiding the stereotypical costumes and body types associated with Provence.⁹⁹ I would further relate the contemporaneity and

favorable à cette peinture qui n'a pas besoin de grande lumière puisqu'elle-même en crée." 29 December 1894 journal entry, Signac, "Extraits du Journal inédit de Paul Signac I, 1894-1895," 114. See also Ferretti-Bocquillon, *Signac et Saint-Tropez, 1892-1913*, Saint-Tropez 1992, 36.

⁹⁷ See Woloshyn's article in this Special Issue.

⁹⁸ Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the Cultural Geography of Mediterranean France," 358-361.

⁹⁹ While Dymond identified this choice with Signac's direct experience of the region and its inhabitants, Roslak has emphasized Signac's idealized decorations as the product of a "tourist" perspective, arguing that Signac never fully understood or integrated with the communities he purported to depict. Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France: Painting, Politics and Landscape*, 159-62.

subtle didacticism of the imagery with the painting's intent to join propaganda and "purely aesthetic emotion."¹⁰⁰ As in Fénéon's portrait, this attempt was signaled and epitomized by abstract decorative pattern, particularly the curling arabesques that refuse to meld with the foreground. Roslak has associated these forms with Fénéon's "authentic Reality," and thus with a timeless synthesis. My point is rather that these explicit patterns were intended just as much as an intervention into the "precarious" present. Their relatively stark contours echo the stiff, geometrical character of the women's bodies, which conjured up Henry's system.¹⁰¹ Signac hoped to connect with the viewer through an accessible, iconographical, mode of representation; such a connection would allow the harmonious action of the painting's line and color, even as the "too apparent procedure[s]" allowed the viewer to become aware of this aesthetic process.¹⁰²

[32] Though tied to the landscape and figures, these distinct forms and patterns were too much for the critic Charles Saunier. He advised that Signac,

renounce the unqualified application of scientific theories that seem more and more to annihilate his personality. He must return to nature. Art is made of life and emotions, not theories. The foliage of a tree is, in and of itself, in rhythm with its surrounding decor; the grace of a gesture will always be superior to the linear directions prescribed by mathematical laws.¹⁰³

[33] Once again Signac was urged to surrender theory (the "mathematical" lines of his explicit decorative patterns) in favor of his own personality, emotion and intuition (to be mirrored by a graceful, organic nature).¹⁰⁴ Once again he faced critical incomprehension, indicating that Signac's combination of propaganda and art – his attempt to address and create a larger collective – had failed to coalesce into an overall harmony. The aesthetic awareness provoked by Signac's systems interfered with the synthetic harmony, unified by an individualized "personality," that critics prized.

¹⁰⁰ See [para. 10](#) above.

¹⁰¹ These qualities also evoke the naïveté of popular imagery, another aspect of Signac's attempt to imagine a proletarian audience. Margaret Werth has discussed the stiff flatness of these figures, which she reads as a failure in Signac's search for "a figurative language that was affirmative and modern, animated and systematic," in Werth, "The Golden Age is not in the Past, It is in the Future," in: *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art, circa 1900*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2002, 82-142, here 100.

¹⁰² See note 66.

¹⁰³ "[...] renoncer à l'application absolue des théories scientifiques qui semblent de plus en plus annihiler sa personnalité. Il doit revenir à la nature. L'art est fait de vie et d'émotions, non de théories. La frondaison d'un arbre est en elle-même rythmique au décor environnant; la grâce d'un geste sera toujours supérieure à toutes les directions de lignes voulues par des lois mathématique [sic]." Charles Saunier, "Salon des Indépendants," in: *La Plume*, no. 92 (15 April 1893), 171-73, here 172.

¹⁰⁴ For the reading of nature and landscape in terms of the artist's personality, or temperament, see Nicholas Green, "Dealing in Temperaments: Economic Transformations of the Artistic Field in France During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century," in: *Art History* 10, no. 1 (March 1987), 59-78.

Au temps d'harmonie

[34] Signac was discouraged, but persistent. An early watercolor study for *Femmes au puits* shows its central motif as part of a larger ensemble. In the summer of 1893, this ensemble reemerged as the idea for a large decorative project whose scale presupposed a wide public.¹⁰⁵ *Au temps d'harmonie (In the Time of Harmony)* (Fig. 4) – initially referred to as "In Time of Anarchy" – would give fuller expression to the anarchist ambitions embedded in *Femmes au puits*.¹⁰⁶ The choice of size was also an attempt to preemptively create the collective works of the future, when art would be understood by all.¹⁰⁷ In other words, the proposed work would speak both to the precarious present and a fully realized anarchist future, serving both as propaganda and as a concrete actualization of anarchist harmony. Cross responded to the project by distinguishing it from standard categories of anarchist visual propaganda:

Your idea for a large canvas is perfect [...] Until today, drawings related to the expression of anarchy have always shown either revolt, or a scene whose poignant suffering suggests revolt. Let us imagine the dreamed-of age of Happiness and well-being, showing the actions of men, their games, their work in this era of general harmony.¹⁰⁸

[35] This subject was particularly suited to Signac's desire to fuse the present need for propaganda and the pure aesthetics of the future because, as the painting's subtitle emphasized, this temporal dialectic was inherent to the depiction of a harmonious anarchist future. He also married his radical aesthetic program to more explicitly radical subject matter, and further sublimated his arabesques in natural forms or arrangements

¹⁰⁵ In the wake of *Femmes au puits*' 1893 exhibition at the Independants, Signac missed the decorative panel's large dimensions, expressing his ongoing frustration with small formats. Undated [April 1893] letter to Cross, Signac Archives. His critique of such formats as "un peu 'commerce'" echoed anarchist condemnations of artistic enslavement under capitalism. See, for example, Walter Crane, "L'Art et les artistes," in: *La Plume: Littéraire, artistique, et sociale*, no. 97 (1 May 1893), 212-213. This article appeared earlier in *La Révolte* as Walter Crane, "Le Socialisme et les artistes," in: *La Révolte (supplément littéraire)* IV, no. 26 (7-13 March 1891), 201-202. The critique of the commercialized *tableau* was central to the preoccupation with decorative painting in this period, which extended beyond anarchist circles. See Watkins, "The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic," 35. The 1892 watercolor study is reproduced in Ferretti-Bocquillon, *Signac & Saint-Tropez, 1892-1913*, 33.

¹⁰⁶ "[G]rande nouvelle! sur vos conseils je vais tâter d'une grande toile! [...] Le joueur de boules devient un personnage épisodique de: au temps d'anarchie (titre à chercher). Au premier plan un groupe au repos [...] homme, femme, enfant [...] sous un gros pin un vieillard conte des histoires à de jeunes mômes [...] sur un coteau [...] la moisson: les machines fument, travaillent, abattent la besogne: et autour des meules [...] une farandole de moissonneurs [...] au centre un jeune couple: l'amour libre!" Undated letter [1893] from Signac to Cross, Ferretti-Bocquillon, *Signac & Saint-Tropez, 1892-1913*, 52.

¹⁰⁷ For discussions of the collective (and, in the case of Albert, explicitly "decorative") nature of the anarchist art of the future, see Crane, "L'Art et les artistes," 213; Charles Albert, "La 21e Exposition des Artistes Indépendants," in: *Les Temps nouveaux* X (8-14 April 1905), 6-7, here 7. See also Émile Verhaeren, "Le Salon de la Libre Esthétique," in: *L'Art moderne* (8 March 1896), 73-75.

¹⁰⁸ "Votre idée pour une grande toile est parfait. [...] Jusqu'à aujourd'hui les dessins relatifs à l'expression de l'anarchie montrent toujours soit la révolte, soit une scène suggérant par sa poignante misère la révolte. Imaginons l'époque rêvée du Bonheur et du bien-être et montrons les actions des hommes, leurs jeux, leurs travaux en cette ère d'harmonie générale." Undated letter [1893] from Cross to Signac, Signac Archives. This passage is reproduced by Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon in Distel et al., *Signac, 1863-1935*, 241.

of figures that had a vaguely contemporary allure. Signac was trying to give "utopia" a concrete form for a public that, in its pre-anarchist disharmony, was not quite ready for either the harmonious society of the future or painting as "purely aesthetic emotion."¹⁰⁹ The goal was to reach this contemporary public through something that they could understand in the present, while simultaneously initiating them to the aesthetic future.



4 Paul Signac, *Au temps d'harmonie: l'âge d'or n'est pas dans le passé, il est dans l'avenir* (*In the Time of Harmony: The Golden Age Is Not in the Past, It Is in the Future*), 1894-95, oil on canvas, 300 x 400 cm. Mairie de Montreuil, Montreuil (Photo: Jean-Luc Tabuteau. Image kindly provided by the Mairie de Montreuil)

[36] *Au temps d'harmonie* was exhibited at the Independants in 1895, and the following year in Brussels at the Salon de la Libre Esthétique. Reactions were mixed. After the Independants' opening, Signac reported in his journal that his fellow painters were complimentary, but that the critics were harsh.¹¹⁰ Upon returning from Brussels in 1896, he wrote that Émile Verhaeren (whose poetry was one of Signac's inspirations) and Henry Van de Velde were the only favorable reviewers, and then proceeded to note their caveats.¹¹¹ In spite of Signac's attempts to soften his systems, Verhaeren (1855-1916) found Signac's theoretical foundations oppressive.¹¹² Signac identified this objection with the arms of the woman and child in the foreground, though it could just as easily have been provoked by the stylized path or the wave-like pattern created by the edge of the foreground shadow. In contrast, Signac's former neo-impressionist colleague Van de

¹⁰⁹ See [para. 10](#) above. Woloshyn has questioned the use of the term "utopia" to characterize this and analogous works, based in part on their desire to locate the anarchist future with such geographical specificity. See her article in this Special Issue.

¹¹⁰ 26 April 1895. Signac, "Extraits du Journal inédit de Paul Signac I, 1894-1895," 117.

¹¹¹ The relevant passage is reproduced in Cachin, *Signac: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, 216. It is identified as a 23 February 1896 journal entry, but, since both of the articles Signac cited were published in March, it is more likely to be from that month.

¹¹² Verhaeren, "Le Salon de la Libre Esthétique."

Velde (1863-1957) praised this "evocation of Happiness, perhaps without equal because it is due solely to the ordering of lines and colors," while criticizing the clothed figures as proof of a "puritanical anarchism."¹¹³ Verhaeren and Van de Velde seemed to provide opposite critiques, but in fact they had both identified elements that, in their explicit, didactic nature, were tied to the painting's role as propaganda. These elements expressed *Au temps d'harmonie's* resistance to absolute synthesis and temporal transcendence.

[37] Signac continued his journal entry by recounting Constantin Meunier's reaction to the painting. Like Pissarro the previous year, the sculptor singled out the background – framed and mediated by the shadowed foreground – for praise.¹¹⁴ Signac concluded that "my painting would have had much more success if I had done it entirely in the light. And yet this shadowed foreground gives more opposition[,] more radiance, more of the painter, more art... But the problem originates in the terrible difficulty of harmonizing these blues and oranges."¹¹⁵ The painter presented the background-foreground disjunction as a formal problem, but it can surely be read in social terms. I contend that Signac's preoccupation with opposition was tied to his dialectical conception of harmony: the attempted syntheses of propaganda and "pure aesthetic emotion," of capitalist present and anarchist future.¹¹⁶ This is not to say that these dialectical contrasts map neatly onto the distinction between the foreground and background. As I have already indicated, the relationship in Signac's painting between the aesthetic, the didactic, and the temporal is complex. Both the foreground and background display entwined propagandistic and pictorial concerns, and the entire painting was clearly intended as a manifestation of the golden age. Nevertheless, artists and critics tended to isolate the luminous background as a satisfactory depiction of future harmony, from which the

¹¹³ Henry Van de Velde, "Les expositions d'art: À Bruxelles, la peinture au 3e Salon de la Libre Esthétique," in: *La Revue Blanche* 10 (1896), 284-287, here 286.

¹¹⁴ Pissarro's opinion was noted by Signac in a 17 May 1895 journal entry. Signac, "Extraits du Journal inédit de Paul Signac I, 1894-1895," 122.

¹¹⁵ "[...] mon tableau aurait eu beaucoup plus de succès si je l'avais fait entièrement dans la lumière. Et cependant ce premier plan à l'ombre donne plus d'opposition plus d'éclat, plus peintre, plus art... Mais le mal vient de la terrible difficulté d'accorder ces bleus et ces orangés." Cachin, *Signac: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, 216.

¹¹⁶ This reading is indebted to Werth, who has pointed to the complex temporalities invoked by Signac's depiction of himself as the man reaching for a fig: "Signac's idyll [...] mov[es] from the external, all-seeing perspective of the artist/viewer to the figure of the protagonist/narrator of the idyll, with the artist both pointing to his own participation in the fictional future and thus propelling a complex exchange between utopian and historical time, and presenting himself as if an 'other.'" Roslak has identified this position as "other," and the distinction between foreground and background, with Signac's touristic gaze – his ambiguous relationship to the "authentic" life of the region. Finally, Dymond has also discussed the painting in terms of contrasts, pointing out its indebtedness to the pastoral tradition's "juxtaposition of dichotomies such as real and idyllic, urban and rural – or, as [she] suggest[s], north and south." The juxtaposition of the "real and idyllic" is the most relevant to my argument. Werth, "The Golden Age is not in the Past, It is in the Future," 137; Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France: Painting, Politics and Landscape*, 157-162; Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the Cultural Geography of Mediterranean France," 353.

shadowed foreground was a distraction. This reaction suggests that the light-filled landscape provided the desired synthesis and transcendence of "authentic Reality," while the foreground, in which Signac's didactic intent was most pronounced, impeded this synthesis.¹¹⁷ The distinction is apparent even in Van de Velde's review, despite its praise of both foreground and background and of Signac's rational, scientific method:

The foreground, the figures occupying the part in shadow, is unified, of a sustained and even atmosphere, in true equilibrium with the sunlit passage rising up to the top. Two flaws, however: the irises and the cock plunked in there as filler – out of place!

But the aspect of life there in the sun, the appearance of serene life, is a sound and rare pleasure of art, an evocation of Happiness, perhaps without equal because it is due solely to the ordering of lines and colors. If others have faulted the scenic treatment, here it disappears, caught up in an overall symphony that moves us solely by its pictorial qualities.

But the figuration is questionable; it is off-putting, like the ridiculously decked-out choruses of popular theaters. Such a get-up has nothing to do with the future exalted by the painter and is a matter of a puritanical anarchism manifestly careless of aesthetics. These women in bouffant sleeves and these men dressed like soldiers on orders for bathing exercises offend too violently my vision of the future for me not to protest [...] [I]f these figures had been nude, the joy of painting them would have been doubled and our satisfaction complete.¹¹⁸

[38] Van de Velde here commends the unity of the foreground, and its balance with the sun-lit landscape, yet his text consistently set the latter apart as the site of a purely aesthetic harmony that dissolved any jarring, theatrical elements – elements antithetical

¹¹⁷ See [para. 19](#) above.

¹¹⁸ "Le premier plan, les personnes agissants dans la partie d'ombre, est d'une pièce, d'une enveloppe soutenue et égale, en juste équilibre avec la phrase ensoleillée, montant jusqu'au sommet. Deux tares cependant, les iris et le coq venu là en bouche-trou – hors cadre!

Mais, l'aspect de la vie, là, au soleil, l'apparence de la vie sereine est bonne et rare jouissance d'art; une évocation du Bonheur, sans égale peut-être, parce qu'elle est due à la seule ordonnance des lignes et des couleurs. D'autres eussent accusé les moyens scéniques; ici, ils disparaissent, sont entraînés dans la symphonie générale qui nous émeut dans ses seules vertus picturales.

Mais la figuration est contestable, elle est rebutante à la façon des chœurs nippés ridiculement des théâtres titrés. L'accoutrement n'aura que faire avec l'avenir exalté par le peintre et relève d'un anarchisme puritain, manifestement insoucieux d'esthétique. Ces femmes en manches bouffantes et ces hommes en tenue de soldats commandés pour l'exercice du bain heurtent trop violemment ma vision d'avenir pour que je ne proteste [...] que ne sont-ils nus, ces personnages, la joie de les peindre eût été double et notre satisfaction entière." Van de Velde, "Les expositions d'art: À Bruxelles, la peinture au 3e Salon de la Libre Esthétique," 286. Emphasis added. The translation is adapted from Werth's. Van de Velde's "théâtres titrés" seems to refer to the secondary theaters, sometimes referred to as "théâtres de boulevards," as opposed to elite or avant-garde theaters or productions. The translation of this phrase as "popular theaters" is not meant to indicate their working-class status, but rather their wider audiences. I would like to thank Bill Weber for his clarification of this context. Werth largely agreed with Van de Velde as to the inadequacy of Signac's figuration to the depiction of anarchist utopia. "Signac relies on the vibrations of divisionist color, the decorative arabesques, the circulatory structure of the composition, and the rhythmic play of color, line, and interval to animate his painting, but they do not compensate fully for the static poses, stilted gestural rhetoric, and stiffening of the figures (not to mention their costume) that in the end lean too heavily on the examples of Puvis's impassive 'calm and noble gestures,' the frieze-like moderns of Seurat's *Grande Jatte*, the tableau-vivant figures of Cross's *Air du soir*, the simplified forms of popular illustration, and the expressive linear reductions of Charles Henry." Werth, "The Golden Age is not in the Past, It is in the Future," 118-119; 134.

to aesthetic transcendence. And though Van de Velde's critique of the figures applied to the entire painting, their contemporary garb was more easily ignored when its stark contours were softened and erased, rather than backlit, by the diffuse, uniform light of the sun. Van de Velde implicitly equated sunlight, future happiness, and purely formal expression. As Tania Woloshyn has shown, sunlight was firmly entwined with anarchist conceptions of the future golden age.¹¹⁹ Imagery more tightly associated with the realization of this anarchist golden age was reserved for the luminous landscape; the amalgamation of machines, collective dancing and storytelling, free love and free art, could only happen in a simultaneously free and collective society.¹²⁰

[39] But with the shallow space demarcated by shadow, Signac insisted on mediating the viewer's experience of the golden panorama. The dark frieze of figures serves as both a repoussoir – distancing the viewer from the luminous landscape – and an entry point into the painting. Reading from left (a depiction of Signac himself) to right, the eye can follow the *boules* player (and the line of the shadow's edge) outside the painting, or follow the impetus of the path that starts at Signac's feet and leads to the sea. Reinforcing this sense of the foreground as a mediating space between the viewer and full-fledged harmony is a series of gestures suspended in paint (and time): Signac's alter-ego picking a fig, the woman (his wife Berthe) extending a fig to the reaching child, the *boules* player about to throw.¹²¹ There are also a number of references to knowledge and education, including the evocation at the left of the tree of knowledge, the man reading, and the interaction between mother and child.¹²² When combined with the interstitial space of the foreground, this imagery suggests that Signac wanted to provide the viewer with a rational perspective on harmony, and on aesthetic emotion – an "Apollonian" vision, as Werth has described it.¹²³ The "puritanical," moralizing imagery is

¹¹⁹ Woloshyn, "*Vers la lumière: Painters and Patients on the Côte d'Azur, c.1887-1910*," 241-245, as well as her article in this Special Issue.

¹²⁰ Werth has discussed this imagery at length (109-113). The sexual and aesthetic freedom of the couple and the painter is indicated by the flowers held by the former and by the latter's muse, as discussed in Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the Cultural Geography of Mediterranean France," 361. For the most part, the figures and objects in the shadowed space could have been encountered in contemporary Saint-Tropez, even down to the iconography, such as the sickle and cock, with anarchist overtones. Signac placed himself and his wife, residents of Saint-Tropez, there; even the cock had a more concrete connection to the present than its generic symbolism implied, since the artist associated it in his journal with the beginning of the Procès des Trente. Again, this distinction should not be pushed too far, since the foreground is clearly incorporated as part of the depiction of future harmony. For a discussion of the significance of the cock, see Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the Cultural Geography of Mediterranean France," 363.

¹²¹ The gestures involving the figs have been analyzed by Werth, who saw the "gap" between the viewer and the child/utopian space echoed in that between the hands of the mother and child. Werth, "The Golden Age is not in the Past, It is in the Future," 139.

¹²² For the child as a reference to education, see Woloshyn, "*Vers la lumière: Painters and Patients on the Côte d'Azur, c.1887-1910*," 242. Both Werth and Roslak discuss the picking of the fig in relation to the tree of knowledge. Werth, "The Golden Age is not in the Past, It is in the Future," 136-139. For the identification of the reading figure as another self-portrait of Signac, see Ferretti-Bocquillon, *Signac & Saint-Tropez, 1892-1913*, 56-57.

¹²³ Werth, "The Golden Age is not in the Past, It is in the Future," 106.

most visually prominent in the foreground, as is the dual system of divided color and linear pattern. The theatricality that disturbed Van de Velde signaled Signac's didactic, propagandistic impulses. Van de Velde and others wanted pure aesthetic synthesis to be fully realized in the present. Instead, Signac projected it in the simultaneously near and distant future, where the painter paints his canvas and his muse contemplates the pure flower of Beauty.¹²⁴ Seemingly at the cusp of an age of propaganda and one of imminent revolution, the golden age is both present and deferred. The shadowed foreground and sun-lit landscape are both divided and joined by the small, crested waves of the shadow's edge, an explicit pattern that embodies the conjunction of rational system and aesthetic emotion. In other words, Signac's dialectic both strives for and resists synthesis.

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Thwarted Ambitions

[40] Signac had attempted to fuse reason and aesthetic emotion through decorative propaganda. Critics like Verhaeren and Van de Velde endorsed the aesthetic effort, while reacting to the propaganda with more reserve. But the didactic character of *Au temps d'harmonie* indicates the extent to which Signac must have been thinking of another audience: the interested, sympathetic proletarians evoked in his 1891 "Impressionists and Revolutionaries." This desired audience, as well as the generally positive reactions of Belgian friends and critics like Théo Van Rysselberghe (1862-1926), Van de Velde, and Verhaeren, is no doubt what prompted Signac to offer *Au temps d'harmonie* for the new socialist *Maison du Peuple* in Brussels while it was still under construction.¹²⁵ Earlier that year, Signac began work on *Le démolisseur* (*The Wrecker*), 1897-1899 (Fig. 5), which he imagined as part of a series of decorative celebrations of labor in the spirit of *Au temps d'harmonie*.¹²⁶ The projected subjects, "the haulers, the wreckers, the builders," had a social resonance beyond anarchism, perhaps with the intention of retaining a wider range of potential settings.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the Cultural Geography of Mediterranean France," 361. Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon has argued that the painter and muse are another representation of Signac and Berthe. Ferretti-Bocquillon, *Signac & Saint-Tropez, 1892-1913*, 57.

¹²⁵ He made the offer during a trip to Brussels, where he stayed from 15 November to 17 December 1897. Philippe Thiébaud identifies his host as Verhaeren; Ferretti-Bocquillon reports it was Van Rysselberghe. Philippe Thiébaud, "Art Nouveau et néo-impresionnisme: Une rencontre éphémère," in: *Péristyles*, no. 11 (January 1998), 25-32, here 30. Ferretti-Bocquillon, "Chronologie," in Cachin, *Signac: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, 368. For more information on the Maisons du Peuple, see *Architecture pour le peuple. Maisons du peuple: Belgique, Allemagne, Autriche, France, Grand-Bretagne, Italie, Pays-Bas, Suisse, Bruxelles* 1984, 7-9; 159-162.

¹²⁶ CR 336, Cachin, *Signac: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, 241-242. Signac, journal entry of 9 June 1896: "J'ai aussi commencé une esquisse de souvenir d'après ma grande toile [*Au temps d'harmonie*] pour me préparer aux esquisses de mes prochaines toiles: les haleurs, les démolisseurs, les constructeurs." Reproduced in Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon, "Paul Signac au temps d'harmonie, 1892-1913," in: *Signac et la libération de la couleur*, ed. Erich Franz, Paris 1997, here 59, note 28. The first and third projected installments of the series were never executed.

¹²⁷ See previous note. Signac's choice of theme may also have reflected the increasing focus on syndicalism in anarchist circles, including that of *Les Temps Nouveaux*, as discussed in Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France: Des origines à 1914*, 1, 265-313. Hutton also discussed the



5 Paul Signac, *Le démolisseur* (*The Wrecker*), 1897-99, oil on canvas, 250 x 152 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy (source: Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_D%C3%A9molisseur_P_Signac_Nancy_2718.jpg)

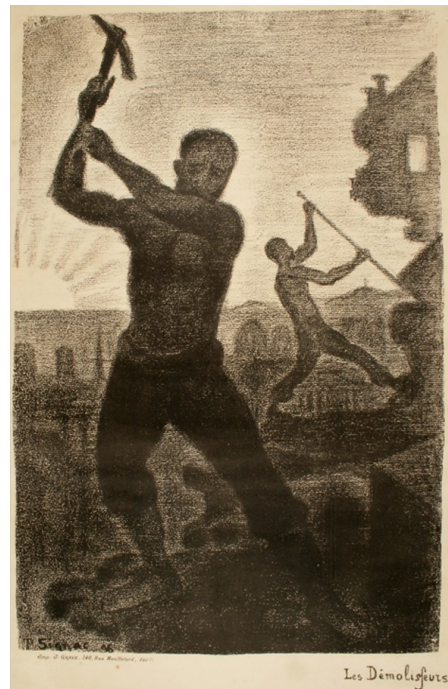
[41] Nevertheless, Signac's central *démolisseur*, poised to strike as parts of a vast city burn behind him, was decidedly anarchist in tenor, a visual transcription of the "solid blow of the pick to the old social edifice." In an earlier lithograph (Fig. 6) of the same subject, published by *Les Temps Nouveaux*, Signac had included an anarchist rising sun.¹²⁸ In the painting, an unseen light source illuminates the central figure's face, torso and upper right thigh.¹²⁹ The association of light with enlightenment and education, as well as the didactic nature of the imagery, point to a propagandistic purpose in keeping with that of

move toward syndicalism, arguing that the instrumentalization of art in the syndicalist context alienated a number of the neo-impressionists, including Signac. See "The Turn to Activist Art" in Hutton, *Neo-impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 209-236. More recently, Woloshyn has questioned this narrative of gradual neo-impressionist disengagement. Woloshyn, "Vers la lumière: Painters and Patients on the Côte d'Azur, c.1887-1910," 246-252. See also her article for this Special Issue.

¹²⁸ The lithograph was published 29 September 1896. For this date, and for a discussion of the association of the rising sun with the beginning of an anarchist golden age, see Dardel, "Les Temps Nouveaux," 1895-1914: *Un hebdomadaire anarchiste et la propagande par l'image*, 18; 34. Hutton has indicated the extent to which this imagery was associated with revolution, anarchist or otherwise, though he explained Signac's intent in anarchist terms. Hutton, *Neo-impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 59-63. Ferretti-Bocquillon has associated the painting, which was begun on 4 January 1897, with the work of Verhaeren, particularly *Les Aubes*; Verhaeren worked on the latter while staying in Signac's studio, in the presence of *Au temps d'harmonie*. Ferretti-Bocquillon, "Paul Signac au temps d'harmonie, 1892-1913," 59-60; Woloshyn, "Vers la lumière: Painters and Patients on the Côte d'Azur, c.1887-1910," 243-244.

¹²⁹ The unseen light source was perhaps intended as a (repositioned) rising sun, given the indications of a dawn sky.

Au temps d'harmonie.¹³⁰ At this point in time, decorative propaganda was an artistic vein that Signac had every intention of mining.



6 Paul Signac, *Les Démolisseurs* (*The Wreckers*), 1896, lithograph, 56.5 x 45 cm. Private collection, Milan (source: Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Les_D%C3%A9molisseurs_%28Paul_Signac%29.jpg)

[42] But to Signac's dismay, the plan to install *Au temps d'harmonie* in the Brussels *Maison du Peuple* fell apart in November 1900; the artist withdrew his offer in the face of the apparent indifference of the building's art nouveau architect, Victor Horta.¹³¹ The imposition of the architect's authority was particularly bitter for an anarchist like Signac. Then, a little over a month later, his contest submission for the decoration of the Mairie d'Asnières (the Asnières city hall) was rejected.¹³² Seemingly undaunted, at the 1901

¹³⁰ Hutton, *Neo-impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 62. It should be noted, however, that the linear patterns that were still visible as distinct entities in *Au temps d'harmonie* have all but disappeared in this painting (an erasure akin to that of the anarchist rising sun).

¹³¹ Signac reported the withdrawal of his offer in an 11 November 1900 journal entry. Philippe Thiébaud, "Art nouveau et néo-impressionnisme: les ateliers de Signac," in: *Revue de l'art* 92, no. 1 (1991), 72-78, here 72-3; Thiébaud, "Art Nouveau et néo-impressionnisme: Une rencontre éphémère," 30-1. Ferretti-Bocquillon, "Paul Signac au temps d'harmonie, 1892-1913," 59-60. The work remained in Signac's studio until after his death, when it was given to the Mairie de Montreuil by the artist's daughter, Ginette Signac. Hung above a landing of the Mairie's grand staircase since 1938, it was recently taken down for restoration when some damage to the work was discovered early January 2012, as noted in Julie Subtil, "On va retrouver l'harmonie!," in: *Tous Montreuil: Le journal de la ville et de ses habitant-e-s*, no. 74 (3-16 April 2012), http://www.montreuil.fr/uploads/tx_egestiondoc/TM74_optim_01.pdf (accessed 8 June 2012).

¹³² Signac wrote that he had begun the sketch for the Mairie d'Asnières contest in the same journal entry in which he reported his retraction of *Au temps d'harmonie*. Though he had little hope for the former, the new decorative opportunity was perhaps part of his motivation in giving up on the *Maison du peuple*. These two sections of the entry are not reproduced together: the discussion of Horta and the *Maison du peuple* can be found in Thiébaud (see previous footnote); the portions of Signac's journal discussing the Asnières project can be found in Paul Signac, "Fragments du Journal

Independants Signac exhibited both *Le démolisseur* – subtitled "*panneau pour une Maison du Peuple*" (panel for a Maison du Peuple) – and the self-described *Projet non retenu pour la décoration de la mairie d'Asnières* (*Project not retained for the decoration of the Asnières city hall*), 1900 (Figs. 7 and 8).¹³³

[43] The pairing of these works asserted the continuity between Signac's decorative ambitions of the nineties and his latest project, yet they also indicate something of a rupture. *Le démolisseur's* large central figure, with its suspended, didactic gesture and dramatic lighting, is more reminiscent of the shadowed foreground in *Au temps d'harmonie*.¹³⁴ In the Asnières project, the smaller scale of the motifs, their distance from the picture plane, the relatively uniform facture, and the diffuse (albeit far more subdued) light recall the bright panorama of Signac's "golden age." The critical acclaim for this work, which is analyzed in this issue by Dymond, confirms the connection.¹³⁵ The legacy of painted propaganda that I have traced from Fénéon's portrait through *Le démolisseur* ended; the artist subsequently focused his production on synthetic, relatively timeless landscapes.¹³⁶ Signac's efforts toward anarchist awareness continued outside the realm of painting.¹³⁷ Propaganda and "purely aesthetic emotion" parted company.¹³⁸

de Paul Signac," in: *Arts de France* 11, no. 11-12 (1947), 97-102, here 98-101. See also the discussion of the Asnières competition in Dymond's article for this Special Issue, "[Valiant, Independent, and Harmonious: Paul Signac and Neo-Impressionism after 1900.](#)"

¹³³ CR 355-358.

¹³⁴ The connection is further reinforced if one views the central *démolisseur* as another self-portrait of Signac, as argued in Richard Thompson, "Ruines, rhétoriques et révolution: Paul Signac et l'anarchisme dans les années 1890," *Arts & Sociétés: Lettre du séminaire* 44 (9 December 2010), <http://www.artsetsocietes.org/f/f-thomson2.html> (accessed 10 November 2011).

¹³⁵ Anne Dymond has also brought to my attention the contrasting lack of critical attention for Signac's *Démolisseur*.

¹³⁶ Nicholas Green observed that, "[u]nlike many ideological domains in which we can point to materially-located institutions as the sites from which power is exercised, nature, it seems, hangs in a vacuum. Because it is to do with leisure time, because it is to do with personalized perceptions, it appears to lie outside or in the interstices of more obviously institutionalized power relations." Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France*, New York 1990, 128. In one of the sketches for the Asnières project (Fig. 7), the landscape is marked both by the signs of industry (on the right) and those of leisure (on the left). Though leisure was no less modern than industry, its temporal markers were less explicit (as indicated by Green). Later landscapes included some depictions of industry (see in particular Signac's views of 1906-1907 views of Rotterdam, CR 434-436, 440 and 448), but were largely focused on temporally ambiguous (in its evocation of both leisure and traditional forms of labor) boating imagery. Signac wrote in 1935 that "[d]ans un tableau, le sujet devrait passer inaperçu, comme le style dans un roman. Un sujet pittoresque se démode; seul le pictural ne se démode pas." Paul Signac, "Le sujet en peinture," reproduced in Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme*, 176.

¹³⁷ As discussed earlier in this essay, Grave's mobilization of artwork for *Les Temps nouveaux* involved Signac in the production of prints and illustrations for the journal and its related publications. Woloshyn has highlighted the difference between paintings and drawings for neo-impressionists like Signac and Cross, suggesting that they found painting a *more* direct means of political expression than the work they did for Grave. Woloshyn, "[Vers la lumière: Painters and Patients on the Côte d'Azur, c.1887-1910](#)," 251-252.

¹³⁸ See [para. 10](#) above. In 1935 Signac would write of propaganda and the pictorial (i.e. the formal) as very distinct elements of art; over time, he argued, the former would fade, leaving only the pictorial. "C'est faute d'éducation et de loisir que les masses restent insensibles au pictural et s'en tiennent au pittoresque. Une société nouvelle fournira de nouveaux sujets, mais qui seront à leur tour, lorsqu'ils auront joué leur rôle nécessaire de propagande et de triomphe, dominés par la



7 Paul Signac, *Projet pour la décoration de la salle des fêtes de la mairie d'Asnières: Esquisse du panneau central no. 3* (Project for the Asnières City Hall Decoration: Sketch for the Central Panel no. 3), 1900, oil on canvas, 49 x 224 cm. Private collection (© Archives Signac, photo J. Hyde. Reprod. from: Françoise Cachin, *Signac. Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre*, Paris 2000, p. 126-127, cat. 357)



8 Paul Signac, *Projet pour la décoration de la mairie d'Asnières: Esquisse de la voûte unique* (Project for the Asnières City Hall Decoration: Sketch for the Single Vault), 1900, oil on canvas, 49 x 120 cm, Private collection (© Archives Signac, photo J. Hyde. Reprod. from: Françoise Cachin, *Signac. Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre*, Paris 2000, p. 127, cat. 358)

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Conclusion

[44] Shut off from public commissions, in this period neo-impressionism was gaining ground in the private market. Though Signac never gave up the dream of aesthetic collectivity (when he reexhibited *Au temps d'harmonie* in 1926 he subtitled it "*décoration pour une maison du peuple*"), he had to be satisfied with the smaller ambitions of the private realm. Anarchist harmony would be spread on a smaller scale, beginning with the individual viewer. In *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionisme*, Signac cited Fénéon's "authentic reality" in support of the argument that all neo-impressionist paintings were decorative:

excluded from official commissions, having no walls to decorate, [the neo-impressionists] wait for a time when they will be able to realize the great endeavors of which they dream [...] Even small-scale neo-impressionist canvases can be presented as decorative. They are neither studies nor easel paintings, but 'exemplary specimens of an art of great decorative development, which sacrifices anecdote to arabesque, nomenclature to synthesis, the fleeting to the permanent, and [...] confers on Nature, which at last grew weary of its precarious reality, an authentic reality,' wrote M. Félix Fénéon.¹³⁹

vraie peinture." Paul Signac, "Le sujet en peinture," reproduced in Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionisme*, 190.

¹³⁹ "[...] exclus des commandes officielles, n'ayant pas de murailles à décorer, ils [the neo-impressionists] attendent des temps où il sera permis de réaliser les grandes entreprises dont ils rêvent [...] Même les toiles de petites dimensions des néo-impressionnistes peuvent être présentées comme décoratives. Ce ne sont ni des études ni des tableaux de chevalet, mais

[45] This combination of private, individualized setting and atemporal synthesis came to be associated with landscapes, like those of the Asnières project, whose unity and balance could be attributed to the individual genius and personality of the artist. Signac's landscapes of the late 1880s had a stiffer, geometric quality (Fig. 9) – created by starkly demarcated planes of color – and then, in the early to mid-1890s, a more curvilinear quality (Fig. 10) – punctuated by emphatic variations of the arabesque. Both of these effects were symptomatic of Signac's greater preoccupation with theoretical systems and with painting as propaganda. In the later landscapes (Fig. 11), the action of divisionism and explicit pattern were subordinated to the subject, as well as the artist's "freer" facture and color.¹⁴⁰



9 Paul Signac, *Collioure, La Plage de la Ville*, Opus 165, 1887, oil on canvas, 62.9 x 80 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (1975.1.208) (Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Reproduction of any kind is prohibited without express written permission in advance from The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

d'exemplaires spécimens d'un art à grand développement décoratif, qui sacrifie l'anecdote à l'arabesque, la nomenclature à la synthèse, le fugace au permanent, et [...] confère à la nature, que lassait à la fin sa réalité précaire, une authentique réalité,' écrivit M. Félix Fénéon." Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impresionnisme*, 124; 126. See [para. 19](#) above.

¹⁴⁰ When emphatic patterns and lines appear in these landscapes, they are less stylized than in *Au temps d'harmonie*. They are thus more tightly aligned with the subject matter (waves, curving branches, wind-filled sails, or, as in Fig. 11, vertical masts). The explicit action of divisionism and line were subdued in favor of the bustling activity of harbors and waterways (the emptiness and stillness of early neo-impresionist landscapes, as in Fig. 9, foregrounded the technique). Note, however, Signac's continued interest in contrast, as demonstrated in Fig. 11. In the early 20th Century, critics read more freedom into Signac's application of paint because his divisionist technique became regular and uniform enough to be ignored or interpreted as a product of the artist's unified self. See Dymond's analysis of this criticism in this Special Issue. More recently, Signac's increasing aesthetic freedom was the premise of Erich Franz, ed., *Signac et la libération de la couleur*, exh. cat., Paris 1997; see in particular Marina Feretti-Bocquillon's contribution.



10 Paul Signac, *Concarneau, Calme du soir*, Opus 220 (*allegro maestoso*), 1891, oil on canvas, 64.8 x 81.3 cm (framed: 102.2 x 86.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (1975.1.209) (Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Reproduction of any kind is prohibited without express written permission in advance from The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



11 Paul Signac, *Marseille, La Bonne Mère (Notre Dame de la Garde)*, 1905-1906, oil on canvas, 88.9 x 116.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Robert Lehman, 1955 (55.220.1) (Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Reproduction of any kind is prohibited without express written permission in advance from The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

[46] But as I have indicated, this freedom came with its own constraints.¹⁴¹ Fénéon's "authentic Reality"; small decorative landscapes; Signac's 1899 treatise on Delacroix and neo-impressionism: each of these points to the related concerns of decorative synthesis, timelessness, and posterity that came to dominate the artist's practice by the end of the 1890s.¹⁴² When anarchist revolution seemed imminent, Signac attempted to bridge the present and future with an aesthetic propaganda directed in part at proletarian viewers. But by 1900, these works were finding little traction, the anarchist golden age appeared distant, and syndicalist anarchism had even less use for the action of "purely aesthetic emotion."¹⁴³ Accordingly, Signac stripped his painting of explicit propaganda, focusing on a timeless decorative synthesis. His famous dictum, "Justice in sociology, harmony in art" had a caveat: "When the eye is educated [...] When the society that we dream of

¹⁴¹ The passage quoted in footnote 138, in which Signac argued that the picturesque (subject matter) would ultimately cede to the pictorial, was followed with this line: "De nouvelles matières, de nouveaux modes d'expression viendront à l'aide de valeurs nouvelles, libérées de la contrainte et de la servitude de la nature extérieure." Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme*, 190. Given the equation in this period of nature with artistic individuality, it is possible that Signac's troubled relationship with nature and the natural was in some sense an unconscious resistance to the more limited (i.e. individualized, even bourgeois) freedom of his life and artistic practice in the absence of an anarcho-communist revolution. Green has examined the importance of nature and landscape in the construction of bourgeois identity (particularly in the way they enabled the social and the hegemonic to appear as the private and personal), as well as its reading in terms of artistic authenticity and personality. Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France*, particularly 127-152; Green, "Dealing in Temperaments: Economic Transformations of the Artistic Field in France During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century." Yet harmony in nature and landscape was also interpreted in anarchist and socialist terms. See Robyn Roslak, "The Politics of Aesthetic Harmony: Neo-Impressionism, Science, and Anarchism," in: *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 3 (September 1991), 381-390; Robyn Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France: Painting, Politics and Landscape*, Burlington, Vermont 2007, particularly 97-112; Margaret Werth, *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art, circa 1900*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2002, 60-63 (for example). For a discussion of the ways in which Signac's life and artistic activities enacted anarcho-communist ideals on a local level, see Woloshyn's analysis (in this issue) of the Côte d'Azur as a kind of "anarcho-communist colony" for neo-impressionist painters. The freedom associated with the Independants (as discussed in Dymond's article) can be read in both individualist or anarcho-communist terms.

¹⁴² Note that in his 1899 text, Signac placed neo-impression in a narrative of art historical continuity rather than rupture.

¹⁴³ In the late 1890s, the scandal and conflict of the Dreyfus Affair could be seen as the kind of "secousse" celebrated by Reclus (see note 84). But, as analyzed by Maitron, anarchist reactions to the Affair were ambivalent (even more so than the response to terrorism earlier in the decade). Though Jean Jaurès and, eventually, Pouget saw the Affair as an opportunity to further justice and the anarchist cause, Grave continued to see it as a dangerous distraction: Dreyfusard anarchist actions smacked of organized politics, implicitly condoning the State all for the sake of a bourgeois officer. Maitron followed his discussion of the Dreyfus Affair with a section on the fragmentation of the anarchist movement, arguing that "La révolution, que l'on croyait toute proche, s'estompe à l'horizon." Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France: Des origines à 1914*, 1, 331-343. For the marginalization of anarcho-communism in the face of a rising syndicalism, and the consequent decrease in the politicization of neo-impressionist painting, see "The Turn to Activist Art" in Hutton, *Neo-impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 209-236. Woloshyn explicitly differs from Hutton, arguing that the neo-impressionists' personal and artistic choices of this period were connected to their anarcho-communist beliefs (see note 141).

exists."¹⁴⁴ Ready to be activated in the viewer's consciousness, Signac's later paintings anticipated the revolutionary harmony, free from propaganda, of this far-off future.¹⁴⁵

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¹⁴⁴ "Justice en sociologie, harmonie en art: même chose [...] Quand l'oeil sera éduqué, le peuple verra autre chose que le sujet dans les tableaux.

Quand la société que nous rêvons existera [...] le travailleur aura le temps de penser et de s'instruire." Commentators tend to gloss over the exclusive use of the future tense in this text (at least as reproduced by the Herberts and elsewhere). Unpublished and undated manuscript in the Signac Archives, which the Herberts dated to c. 1902. Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac and Others I," 479. Alistair Wright has contrasted Maximilien Luce's early 20th century artistic practice with Signac's increasing (though somewhat exaggerated, in his account) ivory tower aestheticism. For Wright, the latter is exemplified by Signac's de-emphasis of subject matter, present in his 1891 letter in *La Révolte* and culminating with this 1902 text. Alistair Wright, "Maximilien Luce and the Specter of Neo-Impressionism," in: *Twenty-First-Century Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Art: Essays in Honor of Gabriel P. Weisberg*, Newark 2008, 254-62.

¹⁴⁵ Though Signac still felt bound by the "propaganda" of the subject, which he also referred to as "la nature extérieure." See note 141.