

After 391: Picabia's early multimedia experiments

Chris Joseph, February 2008 ¹

Overview

This essay attempts to answer a simple question: why did Francis Picabia stop publishing 391? By October 1924, when the final issue was published, 391 was the longest running magazine related to dada and the burgeoning surrealist movement, and Picabia was well established as one of the premiere avant-gardists in Paris and beyond, with literary, artistic and personal connections to all the major players in the movements that had turned the art world upside down for almost a decade. What caused him to suddenly cease publication of his provocative (but well respected) journal?

Instantanéisme: the movement of perpetual movement

The most obvious reason for his ending 391 at this point is that he felt the magazine had simply run its course. He had broken with the dadaists in 1921, and in 1924 also became estranged from the French surrealists, and André Breton in particular. But Picabia was not one to simply run out of steam, and he clearly relished the chance to spar with the surrealists.

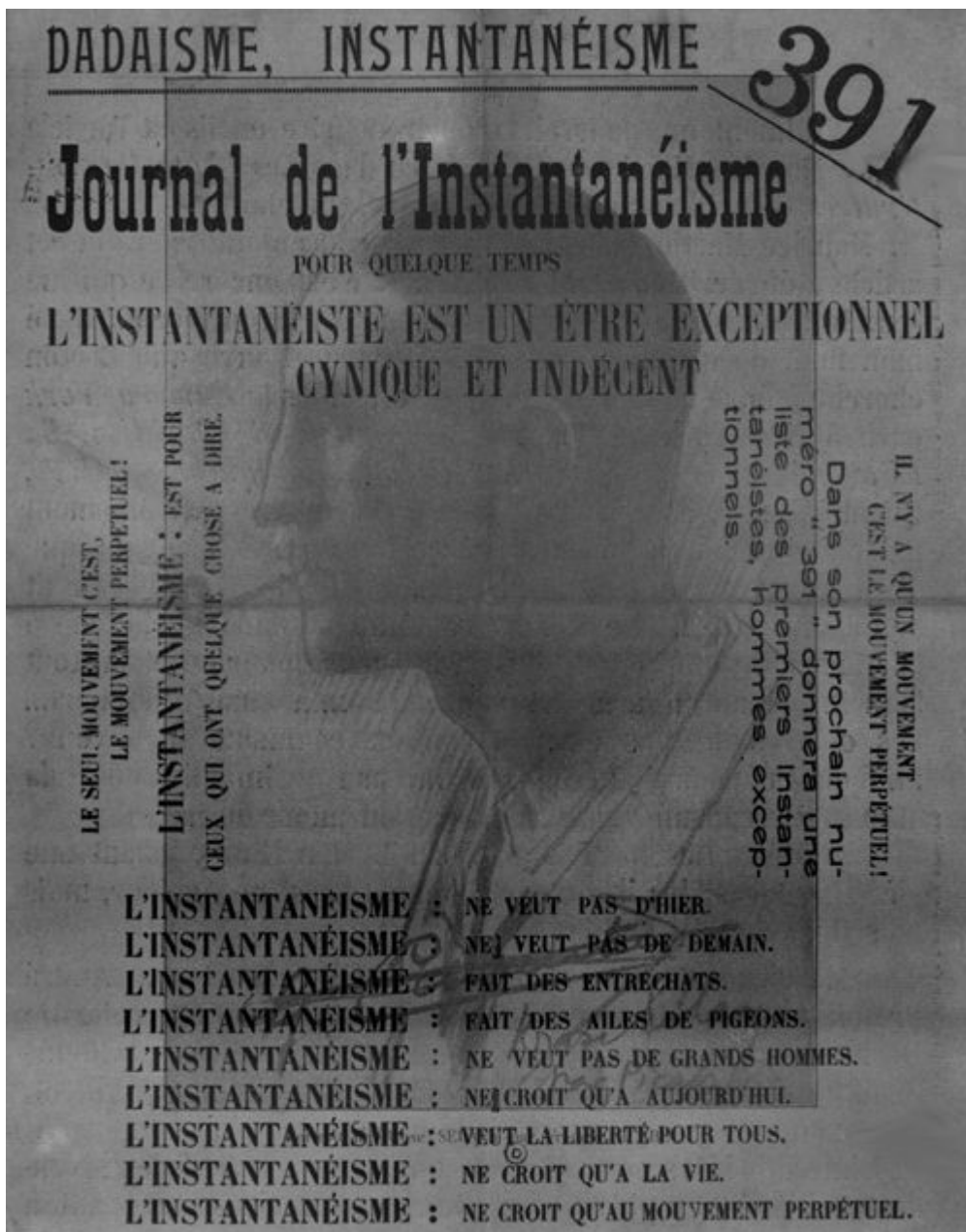
The real story behind the riddle of 391's demise begins several months earlier, in July 1924, with the publication of 391 issue 18 ('Black and White'), and a small, apparently innocuous notice on the back page:



In itself, this may not seem particularly noteworthy. Ballet was a fashionable art in Paris at this time, and it would have been natural for Picabia to collaborate with one of the most experimental Parisian composers, Erik Satie.

Three months then pass until 391 issue 19 ('Journal de l'Instantanéisme') is published in October 1924. This final issue of 391 ostensibly launches Picabia's 'instantanist' movement, which was primarily directed against André Breton and the surrealists, and particularly against the First Surrealist Manifesto² which had just been published.

In answer to Breton's manifesto, Picabia wrote: "André Breton is not a revolutionary... he is an arriviste... he has nothing to say; having no sensitivity, never having lived, this artist is the type of petit bourgeois who loves little collections of paintings..."³



The front cover details his instantanist 'manifesto':⁴

L'INSTANTANÉISME: DOES NOT WANT YESTERDAY.
 L'INSTANTANÉISME: DOES NOT WANT TOMORROW.
 L'INSTANTANÉISME: MAKES ENTRECHATS.⁵
 L'INSTANTANÉISME: MAKES PIGEON WINGS.
 L'INSTANTANÉISME: DOES NOT WANT GREAT MEN.
 L'INSTANTANÉISME: BELIEVES ONLY IN TODAY.
 L'INSTANTANÉISME: WANTS FREEDOM FOR ALL.
 L'INSTANTANÉISME: BELIEVES ONLY IN LIFE.
 L'INSTANTANÉISME: BELIEVES ONLY IN PERPETUAL MOTION.

On left and right hand sides of the cover we see:

**THE ONLY MOVEMENT THAT IS
 PERPETUAL MOVEMENT!**

INSTANTANÉISME: IS FOR
THOSE WHO HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY.

IT IS NOT A MOVEMENT
IT IS PERPETUAL MOVEMENT!

in its next number
"391" will give a
list of the premier
instantanéists,
exceptional men.

In many ways 'Instantanéisme' can be seen as simply another of Picabia's dadaist manoeuvres: a movement that is not a movement, with members to be presented in the *next* issue of 391 (which of course, never arrived); the list of "exceptional men" conflicting with the previous proclamation against such "great men". However the theme of a movement that is "perpetual movement" is important with regard to Picabia's subsequent endeavours, and is something I will return to later.

On the back page of this final issue of 391 the ballet *Relâche* is announced again, but as a half-page advert on the back cover (apart from publishing information, these are the last ever words of 391):

THE SWEDISH BALLET PRESENT
NOVEMBER 27
AT THE CHAMPS ÉLYSÉES THEATRE

" R E L Â C H E "

BALLET INSTANTANÉISME
IN TWO ACTS, ONE CINEMATOGRAPHIC INTERMISSION,
AND THE TAIL OF
FRANCIS PICABIA'S DOG

MUSIC
BY
ERIK SATIE
CHOREOGRAPHY BY JEAN BORLIN

BRING BLACK GLASSES AND
WHATEVER YOU USE TO STOP YOUR EARS.
RESERVE YOUR PLACES!

EX-DADA GENTLEMEN ARE REQUESTED TO COME TO APPEAR AND ESPECIALLY TO SHOUT: "DOWN WITH SATIE!
DOWN WITH PICABIA! LIVE THE NEW FRENCH REVIEW!"

In the three months between issue 18 and 19 we can see an element was added to Picabia's *Ballet Instantanéisme* - a "cinematographic intermission". This small but crucial addition holds the answer of why Picabia ended 391.

Ballet Mekanique

At the time of publication of 391 issue 19, and just before the publicised opening of his *Ballet Instantanéisme*, Picabia saw the first showing of *Ballet Mekanique*⁶, a film produced and

directed by French modernist painter Fernand Léger, who was a friend of Picabia's since their days in Paris before the war. The film is a classic of experimental, avant-garde filmmaking, and one of the first known examples of loop-printing. Accompanying the screening was the music of Erik Satie, the collaborator on Picabia's ballet project. Picabia commented that cinema should: "give us a sense of vertigo... [it] must orient itself towards the spontaneity of invention which will always be more alive than the foolishness of a beautiful photograph."⁷

It is no surprise that Picabia found the possibilities of film intriguing. It was a means of overcoming the static nature of painting that dada had long fought against by using a 'moving' picture. The complex combination of mechanics, optics, chemistry, and time-lag which makes cinematic reproduction possible would have fascinated Picabia, whose love affair with machines can be seen on the cover illustrations of several issues of 391, including the first issue in 1917. He had seen enough the burgeoning cinema industry to decide to finally move away from the 'static' print of 391 to the dynamism of cinema, a form that truly embodied his instantanist principle of "movement that is perpetual movement".

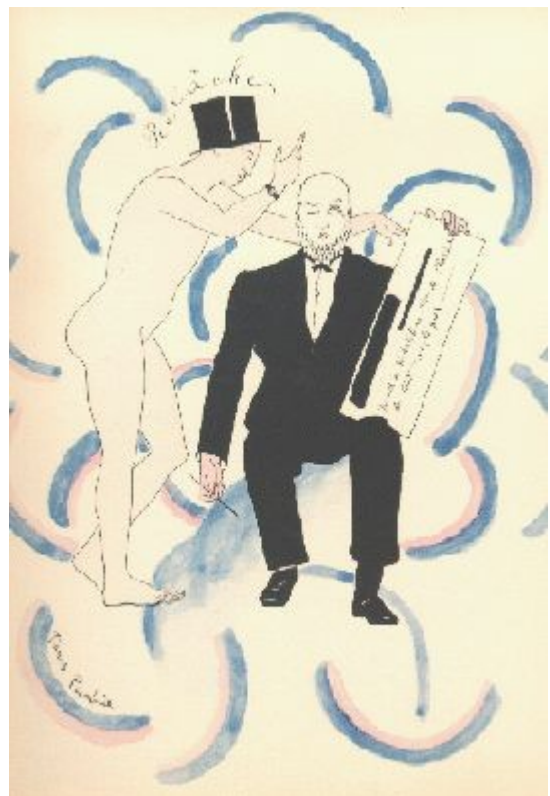
Relâche

Picabia's *Ballet Instantanéisme* was titled *Relâche*. The word is a term used by theatres to indicate that they have closed - "No Performance Tonight". It is believed that Picabia entitled the work *Relâche* when he learned that the opening night might be obstructed by censors, but typically Picabia himself wrote "*Relâche* has no meaning... When will we lose the habit of explaining everything?"⁸

However, sure enough, when the audience arrived at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées for the opening night of *Relâche*, they found the theatre closed. ("Relâche"!). The first performance had actually been cancelled because of the ill-health of one of the stars, but the public were outraged, believing Picabia had staged another Dada stunt.

The real opening took place three days later. The "cinematographic intermission" which had been advertised in the final issue of 391 issue was René Clair's film *Entr'acte*, for which Picabia had written the outline of sequences. The ballet and film were conceived as a total performance that was meant to attack the viewers' conventions and values. In the program for the performance, Picabia wrote "I would rather hear shouting than applauding". At the performance, large signs taunted the audience: "If you are not satisfied, go to hell!" and "Whistles are for sale at the door." Fernand Léger attended the presentation and summed up the effect of the ballet and the film as "a lot of kicks in a lot of behinds, sacred or not".⁹

The performance opened with a 'curtain raiser' in the form of a short film sequence: Picabia's and Satie's cannon shot aimed at the audience. Then the ballet began. It was performed by the Ballet Suédois¹⁰, in their final Paris performance. The background to the stage consisted of a wall of oversize phonograph records. The main characters were a fireman and a woman in evening dress. There were dances of a revolving door, wheel-barrow and crown. A group of eight



men in evening wear dress and undress on stage. The crown is placed on the head of a member of the audience. Finally the woman rejoins her armchair.

*Entr'acte*¹¹

Entr'acte was shown after the first act of the ballet. Unlike Léger's fascination with non-narrative mechanical movements of objects, *Entr'acte* consists of loosely connected narrative sequences. The actors are Picabia's friends, who (at that point) were neither in Tzara's dada nor Breton's surrealist camps: Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Eric Satie and members of the Ballet Suédois.

The film consists of a series of comedic gags: Picabia 'hosing down' Duchamp's and Man Ray's game of chess¹² on top of a roof; a dancing ballerina filmed from underneath, only to be revealed as a bearded man; a huntsman shooting an ostrich egg, only to be shot himself; a funeral hearse drawn by a camel, and the chase of the funeral procession after the hearse; and finally the huntsman dressed as a magician climbing out of the coffin. These gags were suggested by Picabia, who wrote about the film in the program: "*Entr'acte* does not believe in very much, in the pleasure of life perhaps; it believes in the pleasure of inventing, it respects nothing except the desire to burst out laughing."¹³



Clockwise from top left: 1: René Clair, Erik Satie and Francis Picabia during filming; 2: Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray playing chess; 3: Picabia's dance; 4: the game of chess gets hosed down

The critic Rudolf E. Kuenzli describes the film as follows:

"René Clair playfully explores the full cinematic potential of Picabia's proposed scenes by using the whole inventory of cinematic tricks and techniques: changes in tempo, superimpositions, sudden disappearances and transformations. In the first part of the film, the discontinuous episodes of the chess game, the ballerina, the shooting of the ostrich egg are connected through superimposed and interjected lyric images of rooftops and buildings of different long shots of houses and roofs seen diagonally or upside down. In the chase scene, which makes up the second part of the film, Clair explores cinematographic movements of all kinds, and via montage to increase the temp from slow motion to only blurs of movement. The funeral procession, which runs faster and faster after the hearse, is joined by a group of racing cyclists, speeding cars, an airplane, and a racing boat.

*At the end of the film cinema us revealed as an illusion-producing apparatus. The huntsman emerges from the coffin in the guise of a magician who, through the waving of his wand, makes the coffin, the members of the funeral procession, and himself disappear. The word "End" appears on screen. Suddenly a man in slow motion jumps through the 'film screen', breaking the illusion of the magic and chase scenes."*¹⁴

The audience was assaulted with a series of non-related and often provocative images within a work which stressed the pleasure of inventing new spatial and temporal relations while provoking random laughter. While Clair later referred to his early film as "visual babblings"¹⁵, audiences of today can see the film as a serious attempt to subvert traditional values, both cinematic and social.

According to Hans Richter, Picabia had intended that the sound of the audience would contribute as background noise to the film (making the piece an early progenitor of John Cage's 4'33'), "but they all fell silent, as though the sight of his extraordinary cortège had taken their breath away. Picabia, enraged, shouted at the audience "Talk, can't you, talk!" Nobody did."¹⁶

Instantanéisme and multimedia performance

At the end of *Relâche*, Satie and Picabia squeezed into a tiny 5 horsepower Citroen car and drove round the stage waving to the acclaim of their cheering friends. The whole performance naturally caused mayhem in the audience. Picabia had successfully recreated dada within a fully multimedia event, combining live performance with cinematic material.



The musical elements of the *Relâche* night are particularly recognisable in modern multimedia performance. *Entr'acte* consists primarily of very short repeated fragments of music - the most distinctive being derived from Chopin's '*Marche funèbre*' - a standard piece for accompanying funerals and deaths in silent films - which Erik Satie used (as he often did) in a satirical manner. Repetitive music is especially effective in films because its non-developmental nature ensures a stable base for the visuals to rest on. This was the aim behind Satie's score for *Entr'acte*. The film is mostly non-narrative, although the second half does follow (in a fragmentary way) the progress of a funeral procession, and is principally interested in camera effects, and movement. There are very few stationary shots, and the scenes are short. Satie's music provides a background of continuity against which these changes can occur without too much

confusion. The overall impression of movement and speed remain, but without the confusion that would have resulted had the music not been based on simple repetitions.

Satie's music to this film was one of the very first instances (if not the first) of a film score composed frame-by-frame specifically for the film to ensure the music will match exactly with the visuals. It was his only film score, and *Relâche* and *Entr'acte* were also his last works (he died in 1925). However this opened the doors for other composers to work in film: for example, Shostakovich wrote his first film score in 1929 for *New Babylon*.

One month after the opening performance of *Relâche* and *Entr'acte*, Picabia and Clair collaborated on another ballet entitled *Cinésketch*. For this, the stage was divided into three equal sections, in which actors performed simultaneously. The stage light focused on one section, then cut to another, achieving an effect similar to a rough montage in film. Picabia commented: "Until the present the cinema has been inspired by the theatre. I have tried to do the contrary in bringing to the stage the method and lively rhythms of the cinema."¹⁷

The end of 391

Returning to Picabia's final issue of 391, and the front cover manifesto of *Instantanéisme*, we can suggest that there was only one place Picabia believed "a movement that is perpetual movement" could be achieved: in cinema and the moving image. He does not publish any more issues of 391 because he believes cinematic technologies offer a greater power than print to disrupt the expectations of the audience and to undermine the norms and codes of social conventions. He transfers his 'esprit dada' into a new phase of artistic production which involves - and fetishises more than ever before - the machine, speed and the 'now', in a post WWI age where the machine was no longer (solely) feared as a primary engine of world destruction. As Hans Richter writes:

*"The word 'Instantaneism' emphasized yet again the central experience of Dada, as Picabia saw it, and as he wanted it to be: the 'value of the instant'."*¹⁸



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Notes

¹ From an original essay written 1st April 2002.

² <http://www.391.org/manifestos/1924firstsurrealistmanifesto.htm>

³ Quoted in William Camfield (1979), *Francis Picabia* [Princeton: Princeton University Press], p.208

⁴ All translations by babel, <http://www.babel.ca> , 2002/2008

⁵ *Entrechat* - an interweaving or braiding. An Entrechat is also a step of beating in which the dancer jumps into the air and rapidly crosses the legs before and behind each other. Entrechats are counted from two to ten according to the number of crossings required and counting each crossing as two movements, one by each leg; that is, in an entrechat quatre each leg makes two distinct movements. Entrechats are divided into two general classes: the even-numbered entrechats, or those which land on two feet - deux, quatre, six, huit and dix - and the odd-numbered entrechats, or those which land on one foot - trois, cinq, sept and neuf.

⁶ *Ballet Mecanique* is a brief non-narrative exploration of cubist form, black and white tonalities, and various vectors through its constant, rapidly cut movements and compositions. Many of the film's forms and compositions are reflected in - or themselves reflect - forms and compositions in Léger's famous cubist paintings from the period. "The film flashes through over 300 shorts in just under fifteen silent minutes. The subjects of these fleeting images are diverse and difficult to classify quickly: bottles, hats, triangles, a woman's smile, reflections of the camera in a swinging sphere, prismatically crafted abstractions of light and line, gears, numbers, chrome machine (or kitchen) hardware, carnival rides, shop mannequin parts, hats, shoes, etc. All interweave a complex cinematic metaphor which bonds man and machine" - Donald Faulkner, NYS Writers Institute, <http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/webpages4/filmnotes/fnf96n3.html>

⁷ Rudolf E. Kuenzli (1987), ed: *Dada and Surrealist Film* [New York Willis Locker Owens] p.7

⁸ Quoted in sleeve notes by S.W. Bennett - SATIE, E., et al. (1968), *Homage to Erik Satie original works for orchestra and orchestrations* [New York: Vanguard]

⁹ Fernand Léger, *Vive 'Relâche'*, Paris-Midi 17th December 1924

¹⁰ The *Ballets Suédois* (Swedish ballet) was founded by Rolf de Maré, a wealthy Swedish nobleman, art collector and lover of dance. It existed until 1925 as the rival to Diaghilev's *Ballet Rus*. The *Ballets Suédois* helped make ballet one of the most fashionable arts thriving in Paris at the time. It was written about, it started fashions - the crowds came to the ballet. de Maré disbanded the company shortly after the performance of Picabia's *Relâche*, having lost millions during the five year run of the company.

¹¹ At the time of writing, *Entr'acte* can be viewed online at http://www.ubu.com/film/clair_entracte.html

¹² Duchamp and Man Ray were fanatical chess players - Duchamp wrote in 1919 "I play chess all the time... I play night and day and nothing in the world interests me as much as to find the right move... I am less and less interested in painting. Everything around me is knight shaped or Queen shaped and the outside world only interests me in as much as it transposes into winning or losing positions." In the July before *Entr'acte* was released, Duchamp had participated in the Paris olympiad as a member of the French team. Francis Picabia was also a keen chess player. In 1917 the competition between the magazines 391 and The Blind Man became so intense that it was decided that the matter should be settled by a duel: the loser would stop publishing. The weapons were chess pieces. Picabia played white for 391, and Henri Pierre Roché played black for The Blind Man. Picabia won in thirty four moves, and The Blind Man ceased publication. It is interesting to consider how different the history of dada may have been if Picabia had been a less accomplished chess player.

¹³ From the 'Programme de Relâche' in *La Danse* (November 1924), repeated in Francis Picabia (1978), *Ecrits* [Paris: Belfond], II, p.167

¹⁴ Rudolf E. Kuenzli, op. cit, pp.5-6

¹⁵ "The film is really Picabia's, the man who has done so much to liberate the word and the image. In *Entr'acte*, the image is not required to be significant but has an existence in its own right. These visual

babblings seem to me the most correct course for the future of the cinema." - Rene Clair, quoted on MoMA (The Museum of Modern Art, USA), http://moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=91485 - source unknown.

¹⁶ Hans Richter (1965), *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* [London: Thames and Hudson] p.198

¹⁷ Quoted in William Camfield, op. cit, p.213

¹⁸ Hans Richter, op. cit. p. 192