Joan Miró: Poetic Manifestations

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Across from the hillside, the flowery sweetness of the stars, and of the sky, and of the rest descends upon our face like a basket; and creates the blossoming blue abyss below.[1]

Rimbaud

Joan Miró, a Catalan artist, was religiously dedicated to the work of poets. [2] In 1925, Miró felt it necessary to begin incorporating poetry into his paintings, shifting the essence of his work towards poetic impression.[3] Miró writes: "I make no distinction between poetry and painting."[4] Despite fluctuating between various styles throughout his career, Miro's distinct style consists of anthropomorphic figures, pictograms and complicated signs.[5] Miró's obvious connection to poetics is seen in his peintures-poémes*, or* painting-poems. First appearing in 1925, this series juxtaposes painterly images with poetic text on canvas.[6] Rosalind Krauss, in *Joan Miró: Magnetic Fields*, writes that his "carefully selected visual and poetic sources…bears witness to a high degree of thought about the image's meaning".[7] While Miró's early painting-poems incorporated more obvious and meaningful references to poetics, his large-scale murals that emerged later in his career appear to embody many of his early poetic influences in a less-obvious form. While the experience of viewing these monumental canvases is vastly different than reading words on a page, elements of poetry from the 20th century manifested in the works

[1] Krauss, Rosalind E., and Margit. Rowell. *Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields*. New York: Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation, 1972. Print. pp. 21.
[2] Dupin, Jacques. *Miró*. New York City, New York : Abrams , 1993. pp. 432.
[3] Krauss and Rowell, "Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields," 21.
[4] Dupin, "Miró," 431.
[5] Dupin, "Miró," 313.
[6] Dupin, "Miró," 434.
[7] Krauss and Rowell, "Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields," 15.

of Joan Miró to influence the monumental triptych of *Blue I, Blue II*, and *Blue III* from 1961. As Miró simplified and enlarged his forms, he seemingly embraced the raw elements of his past.

Visual poetry emerged during a time of extraordinary creative output from avant-garde artists, with the Italian and French avant-garde movements reaching their height in 1914. Guillaume Apollinaire, a French poet, spearheaded the rise of visual poetry. Apollinaire's invention of the figurative poem, properly known as the calligram, revolutionised poetics.[8] The calligramme is poetry in both visual and verbal form; the text is structured to create an image that it describes.[9] Apollinaire's invention of the calligramme gave line a new dimension in its objectification of text, using non-pictorial signs to construct pictorial objects.[10] Miró received anonymous copies of calligrammes from the Catalan poet Joseph M. Junoy and discovered Apollinaire in 1917, opening his mind to the possibilities of the visual and verbal.[11] Because the words of the calligramme also structure the poem's images, the form and content exists synonymously within the composition. Michael Foucault writes:

> "The calligramme takes the muteness of the line which bounds the drawn figure and makes it speak by filling it with word; and takes the spatial indifference of words written on a page and makes them bow to the law of simultaneous form which operates within the world of vision…As a sign, the letter permits the fixing of words: as a line it permits the figuration of objects. in this way the Calligramme seems to efface the eldest oppositions of alphabetic civilisation: showing and naming; drawing and speaking; reproducing and articulating; imitating and signifying; looking and reading."[12]

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[8] Bohn, Willard. *Circular Poem-Paintings by Apollinaire and Carrà*. *Comparative Literature*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1979, pp. 246.
[9] Krauss and Rowell, "Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields," 23.
[10] Krauss and Rowell, "Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields," 14.
[11] Robinson, William H., et al. *Barcelona and Modernity: Picasso, Gaudí, Miró, Dalí: The Cleveland Museum of Art, October 15, 2006 - January 7, 2007 and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, March 7 - June 3, 2007*. Yale University Press, 2006. pp. 342.
[12] Krauss and Rowell, Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields, 25.

Rather than poetics solely existing as written word, Apollinaire broadens the capabilities of poetry to encompass the visual. The writing and the visual images work together to enhance each other. The visuals are not decorative elements but carry as much meaning as the written word. The typeface and spatial arrangement of words on the page are as crucial to the meaning of the poem as the words themselves. If the words of the poem were structured in a traditional format, the imagery that the poem elicits would only come from the reader's associations with those specific words. The addition of visuals broadens the scope of the poem. Rather than solely finding meaning in words, the visuals provide the reader an opportunity to generate unique associations. The reader can simultaneously navigate the words of the poem while also finding new meaning in the visuals. The visuals depend on the verbal just as much as the verbal depends on the visual.

Guillaume Apollinaire's poem *Il Pleut* from 1916 is a calligramme that demonstrates how its images can exude poetic qualities through the simple manipulation of line and space. Apollinaire's calligramme *Il Pleut* (The Rain) consists of letters falling diagonally across the page – like rain. The bold letters give the impression of the heaviness of rain, while their fragmentated edges form the simple, almost weightless droplets. The reader can connect with the experience of rain without understanding the text itself. While the text would enhance one's understanding of each poem, its visual structure overcomes the limits of language and still manages to evoke poetic undertones. Margit Rowell, in Joan Miró: *Selective Writings and Interviews*, quotes Miró: "In my paintings, the forms are immobile and mobile…they are immobile because of the cleanness of their contours and because of the kind of framing that sometimes encloses them…Because there is no horizon line or any indication of depth…You

could say that although they keep their autonomy, they push each other around."[13] While Miró applies this explanation to his own forms, this is also the case with the calligramme. Apollinaire's calligramme takes a simple image, like the image of rain, and enhances its presence through the suggestion of motion. Although the letters themselves are immobile, and constrained by the sharp edges that enclose their shape, the poem's structure is still able to suggest an endless stream. The lack of depth allows the signs to move across the surface of the page, pushing each other around while still maintaining their autonomy.

Miró's *L'été* is a calligram that expands upon the ideas of Apollinaire but includes visual images that are born from line rather than the written word.[14] Unlike Apollinaire's calligramme, Miro's *L'été* includes abstract images that mirror the content of his poetry. The visuals are still entirely depended on the text, and vice versa, but the images are not solely born from written word. The written text of *L'été* is a visual representation of a body of a woman. The text describes a nude woman on a beach and the poem's body of text acts as a visual representation of the body that the text describes. Miró's work is different than a traditional calligramme in that the visual representation of the body is difficult to realise without other visual clues. For the reader to understand how the poem is structured in relation to the text, the viewer must connect with its other images. For example, the swirls on either side of the text may be the "breasts" of the woman; the squiggly lines under the sun may be the "waves" of the ocean; and the crescent-like image may be the "crescent moon" or the woman's "smile." There are no correct answers: a single image does not have a single association. Because an image can hold multiple associations simultaneously, there is always an opportunity for the mind to make new connections. [15] This, in

[13] Rowell, "Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews," 248.
[14] Krauss and Rowell, Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields, 14.
[15] Krauss Rowell, Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields, 26.

turn, broadens the scope of the entire poem. Maurer writes that "by his commitment to poetic imagination and creative freedom, Miró transformed the elements of the ordinary into intriguing images that expand the viewer's own consciousness through an open-ended process of suggestion and analogy."[16] By adding images that relate to the text, the reader can use both modes of representation to better understand the poem and navigate its complicated structure. The images and text influence each other simultaneously to enhance the poetic experience of the work.

Photo: This is the Colour of My Dreams from 1925, the same year Miró declared his commitment to poetry,[17] is an example of a painting poem that expands upon the ideas of the calligramme but plays with how words and image can overlap to function simultaneously.[18] Like the calligramme, *Photo's* letters float in open space and its elements form an image of what the text describes. However, In *Photo*, Miró blurs the line between what makes the written word and image distinct by overlapping the meaning of his poetic language and visual markers. Using the idea that signs only inhabit a world a significance if meaning is bestowed upon them, Miró constructs significance in how he deliberately rests each element on the surface of the canvas.[19] For example, In *Photo: This Is the Colour of My Dreams*, Miró depends on visuals and written text to express the multiplicity of meaning behind a single representation. Miró's *Photo: This Is the Colour of My Dreams* is a simple painting that contains no illusion to space or depth, with the text and colour floating in empty space. In this piece, the word "Photo" floats in the top lefthand corner. In the bottom righthand corner, there is a small clump of blue paint that floats over the words "This Is the Colour of My Dreams." While the text is written in the same font, the word

[16] Maureer, *The Kerosene Lamp' and the Development of Miró's Poetic Imagery,* 74.
[17] Krauss and Rowell, "Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields," 21.
[18] Dupin, "Miró," 435.
[19] Krauss and Rowell, Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields, 14.

"Photo" floats in space at a distance from "This Is the Colour of My Dreams." The word "Photo" does not just refer to the word photograph but may also refer to the original Latin meaning of light. In addition, the word "graphy" translates to the act of writing in Latin.[20] Therefore, Miró is visually representing the word "photography" by drawing the word "light" in calligraphic line. In this work, the visual representation of the words become as important as the meaning behind the words themselves. Furthermore, the simple addition of colour is crucial to the representation of his dreams; it acts as an image that is understood in relation to the text. While it is natural to immediately assume that the text labels the colour's purpose, Miró's composition urges the viewer to question how the colour is also an agent of influence within the composition. No element is more important than the other, and each element holds equal weight in meaning. Therefore, it is important that we begin to read Miró's monumental works as poems that are free from the limits of language.

Christian Morgenstern's *Fishes Night Song*, a popular poem amongst avant-garde circles in Europe when published in Germany in 1906, is a poem that relinquishes itself from the confines of language.[21] While Apollinaire's work uses signs to construct an image, Morgenstern's poem combines the visual and verbal through the simple repetition of abstract symbols. There are no letters or words in the poem that can be easily translated or directly understood. Because there is nothing to read, it is up to the reader to decode its mystery. Krauss writes that "each unit in the poem possesses the quality of a primitive sign surfacing from a world of resemblance onto a field of representation."[22] Instead of the reader focusing on concrete meaning, the reader generates meaning from how the forms interact. At first glance, these symbols seem to allude to features

[20] "Photography." Edited by Oxford University Press , *Oxford English Dictionary* , 2021, www-oed-com.libproxy.newschool.edu/view/Entry/80855#eid2697086.
[21] Krauss and Rowell, Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields, 29.
[22] Krauss and Rowell, Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields, 26.

of speech, such as poetic rhythm, but the poem chooses not to include the words that it wishes to stress. Furthermore, the reader may associate the symbols with scales and fins or the *U's* as waves and the *dashes* as fish swimming across a lake. [23] The absence of concrete meaning gives the reader the opportunity to find meaning in their own interpretation and relationship with the symbols. The symbols are not necessarily letters, words, or images; those things are created by the viewer's imagination. While there are vague representations that arise, it is important that the viewer work to interpret the forms.[24] Discussing *Fishes Night Song*, Robert Scott writes that "words are full of misunderstanding…people begin to value words more than they do the thing itself."[25] *Fishes Night Song* demonstrates how abstract symbols can carry a depth of meaning that words cannot. Because the poem is no longer restricted by a single word having a single meaning, or rooted in an image that is forced to carry various associations, there is a sense of freedom in how one can approach the work.

Thus far, this essay has focused on Miró's ability to combine painting and poetry through the simultaneous representation of words and images on the surface of a canvas through these poetic examples, and how various forms can influence one another without obvious meaning or translation. Miró's monumental triptych of *Blue I*, *II*, and *III* embody the qualities of these previous poetic examples to create all-encompassing poems that swallow the consciousness of the viewer. This monumental triptych is dated March 4, 1961.[26] Prior to the triptych's completion, Miró moved to a new studio in 1956. Immediately after this move, Miró stopped painting altogether. Marco Daniel explains why Miró made this decision:

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[23] Scott, Robert Ian. "Metaphorical Maps of Improbable Fictions: The Semantic Parables of Christian Morgenstern." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 52, no. 3, 1995, pp. 279.
[24] Krauss and Rowell, Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields, 26.
[25] Scott, Metaphorical Maps of Improbable Fiction, pp. 28.
[26] Dupin, "Miró," 313.

> "Miró commented how in his new studio he finally felt that he had enough space but the experience of unpacking crated-up works he had not seen since he had left Paris was "a shock, a real experience." And he went through a process of critical self-examination…The intense renewing of previous works from different periods of his life, he claimed, was behind this extended period of inactivity as a painter, and drove him not just to destroy many old pieces but subsequently also to resume work on some of these canvases, paint over them and otherwise respond to these reminders of the past." [27]

During this period of contemplation and self-examination, it seems as though Miró connected with his past. While it is difficult to know for certain how Miró processed his older works, it is interesting to unpack how certain qualities of these poetic influences continue to manifest throughout his life. While the triptych does not take on the form of a traditional poem, but a towering work of art, I intend to explore how the poetic structure and essence of the calligramme, *fishes,* and the developments of Miró's painting-poetry through *Photo*, coalesce in this enormous work.

Blue I is the first work in the series, consisting of various forms on an expansive blue backdrop. A thin line cuts diagonally across the canvas, breaking the surface into two distinct segments. To the left of the centre line, a simple red ovular-shape floats between five black dots of various sizes and transparency. To the right of the line, there are three more of these black dots. In *Blue I*, Miró begins to use drawing as a form of writing through a recognized flexibility with line.[28] The single line that stretches across *Blue I* resembles Apollinaire's calligrammes. Like *Il Pleut*, the single line does not fall or rise exactly straight, it resembles a line that – zoomed in – is built from the sharp edges of letters. The line falls like the rain in *Il Pleut* by mimicking its inconsistent patterns of flight across the sky. Blue *I* and *L'été* also have similarities

[27] Daniel, Marko, and Mathew Gale, eds. *joan miró*. London : Tate, 2011, pp. 193.
[28] Krauss and Rowell, "Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields," 14.

that highlight how Miró continues to incorporate visual elements from his own calligramme. For example, the shape of the red dash at the center of *Blue I* is present in the thick black ink of *L'été.* While *L'été* is a much more chaotic composition that uses letters as visual ques, the varying thickness and thinness of line throughout the *L'été* is also present in *Blue I*. The thin line in *Blue I* seemingly acts like a free verse that cuts through the visual images that surround it. Through this comparison, we can see how Miró seemingly refuses to distinguish drawing from writing or poetry from painting[29] Furthermore, *Blue I* appears to embody many of the elements of *Photo*. Like *Photo*, there is an extreme amount of simplicity and an intimidating amount of space.[30] The composition of *Blue I* is reminiscent of *Photo* in how the forms position themselves atop the canvas. The edges of the black dots appear to disintegrate in a similar manner as the blue pigment in *Photo*. Like *Photo,* the black spot's edges seep into the space that surrounds it, slowly disappearing in time. They are not contained by sharp line, but slowly begin to break apart at the edges. Furthermore, In *Blue I*, the forms drift across the neutral, blue background, and float like the pigment in *Photo*. Krauss explains that in Miró's work "each element is built from the same weight and intention, all opening onto each other in absolute parity."[31] The symbols exist on their own, but also interact and influence one another to develop their own language. Just as the elements of *Photo* interact to develop a unique and expressive dialogue, the elements of *Blue I* do the same.

In *Blue II*, a thick red dash is followed by a series of black dots. *Blue II* holds qualities that are reminiscent of an anonymous and wordless poem, like *Fishes*. The reading of the work resembles the simplicity of *Fishes* in that there is a clear repetition of symbols that can

[29] Rowell, "Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews," 89.
[30] Krauss and Rowell, Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields, 133.
[31] Krauss and Rowell, Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields, 22.

form various interpretations depending on how the symbols manifest and develop in the mind of the viewer. There is a sharp red slash that is followed by a trickle of black dots. Jacques Dupin, in *Miró*, writes that "in *Blue I,* the interplay of the black spots is like a simultaneously massive and light punctuation. In *Blue I*, this punctuation adopts the form of a constellation. In *Blue II*, it is disposed like stones in the shallows of a river"[32] Unlike *Blue I*, the edges of these dots in *Blue II* are confined and distinct from the blue background; they resemble text against a white page. The presentation of these dots embodies the calligramme in how they are autonomous forms that give the impression of motion. Like the rain in *Il Pleut*, the forms ought to appear motionless; however, their position on a horizonless plane creates the illusion that each form is in motion, pushing the next forward. This illusion of motion is present in each of the panels; however, their relationship to the other elements in the frame inform their direction. In *Blue I*, the forms appear to move around each other in a circular motion, while in *Blue II* the forms appear to push each other forward. While there are few elements in each frame, these subtle differences completely alter how they move through space. Furthermore, like *Fishes*, Miró strips *Blue II* of obvious meaning. Because there is no concrete meaning, the visual and verbal comes together as one and functions simultaneously. The symbols are not chained to meaning like words and letters; instead, they are entrusted with the weight of the unknown. While the simple use of line in *Fishes* resembles words or symbols that ought to be read without thought, the viewer's thoughtfulness and impression of how the symbols interact with each other is what activates *Blue II.*

Miró's *Blue III* contains the simple line that stretches across the page, connecting itself to the blurred edges of the red dot. The distinct black dot, that previously appeared in a repetitive

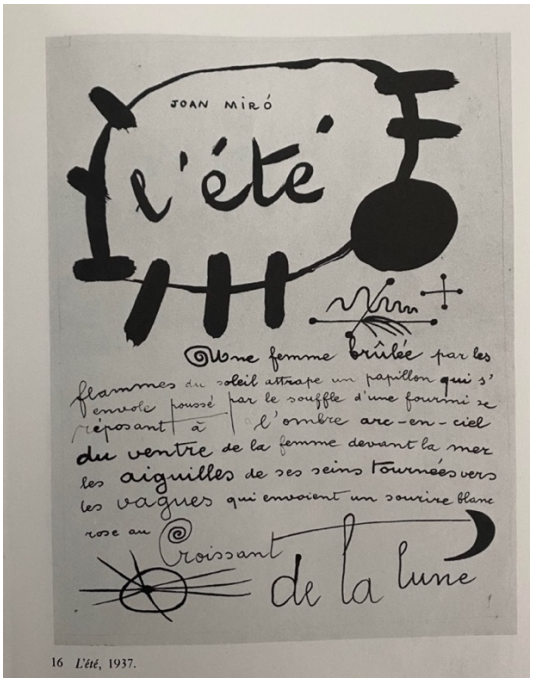
[32] Dupin, "Miró," 313.

line of dots in *Blue II*, now sits alone in the bottom right-hand corner. In *Blue III*, Miró combines the elements *of Blue I* and *II* but simplifies them even further. Miró strips the surface to its most bare state and leaves the poem's most basic elements. Margit Rowell references Miró: "my figures underwent the same simplification as my colours. Simplified as they are, they are more human and more alive than they would be if represented in all their details. Represented in detail, they would lose their imaginary quality, which enhances everything."[33] The lack of detail activates Miró's compositions. In a calligramme, the images are restricted and confined by the edges of the letters and cannot be executed in a great amount of detail. The absence of detail in the form of the calligramme permits the viewer to conjure their own impression of the images, while also simultaneously ensuring that it relates to an image in the text. In *Fishes*, the ambiguity of the forms also enhances this imaginary quality that Miró speaks of, despite being confined by simplicity and repetition. Like the calligramme and *Fishes*, Miró gives the viewer power over his forms while also ensuring that they have the power to mean something. It is important to note that Miró did not consider any of his works to be abstractions. Krauss references a commonly used quotation by Miró himself: "For me a form is never something abstract; it is always the sign of something."[34] Despite the triptych's simplicity, the forms are always meant to form an image of something – like the calligramme is meant to form an image of what the text describes. However, this daunting amount of space also leaves more space for the viewer. By relying on space, simplicity, and ambiguity, Miró removes himself from the composition. While his marks are meant to mean something, this is a personal experience for the viewer that does not involve

[33] Rowell, "Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews," 252.
[34] Krauss and Rowell, "Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields," 126.

the artist. By embracing anonymity, Miró accomplishes the poetic art of bringing the viewer closer to themselves.[35]

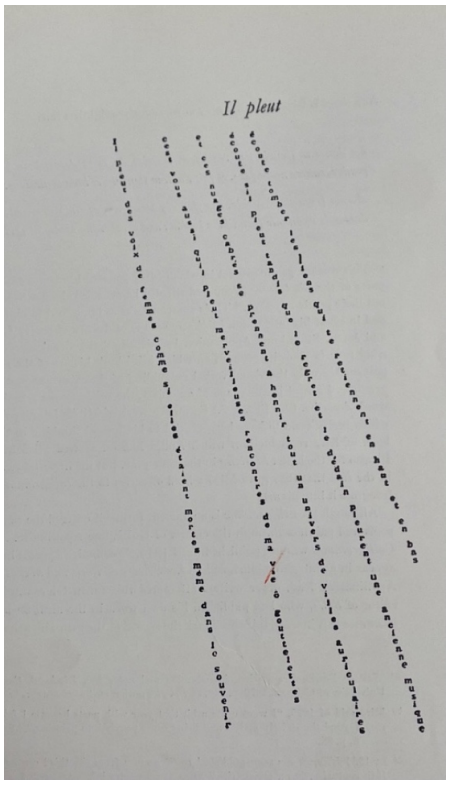
Miró's compositions display thoughtful and deliberate thinking about poetics, with this thoughtfulness even emerging in his later works. Miró's forms do not appear to hold an objective purpose: they are built for their poetic powers of evocation that signal various feelings and ideas but define nothing explicitly. Miró's dedication to early forms of visual poetry, through the works of artists like Apollinaire and Morgenstern, are ever-present. The detail-less, spacious, and anonymous combination of poetic elements gives the viewer freedom, but also urges them to make thoughtful and meaningful connections. The triptych of *Blue I, Blue II and Blue III*, are an immersive experience; they are living, breathing poems.



Joan Miró. *L'été*, 1937. Photo: Margit Rowell,

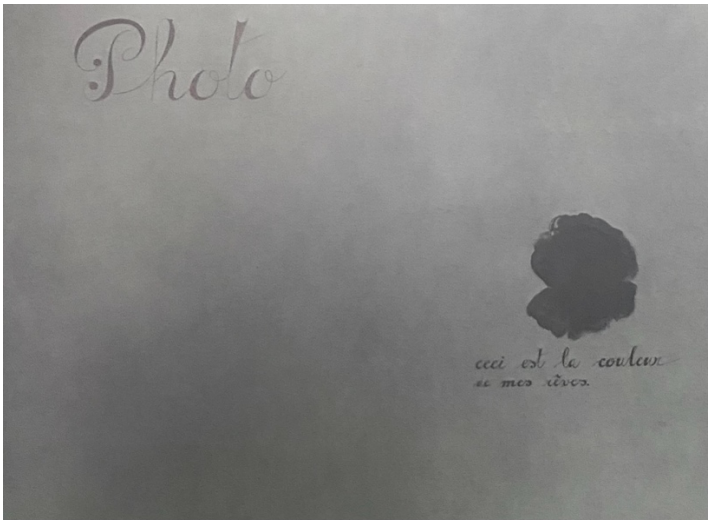
Photo: Krauss and Rowell, "Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields," page 22.

[35] Rowell, "Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews," 252.



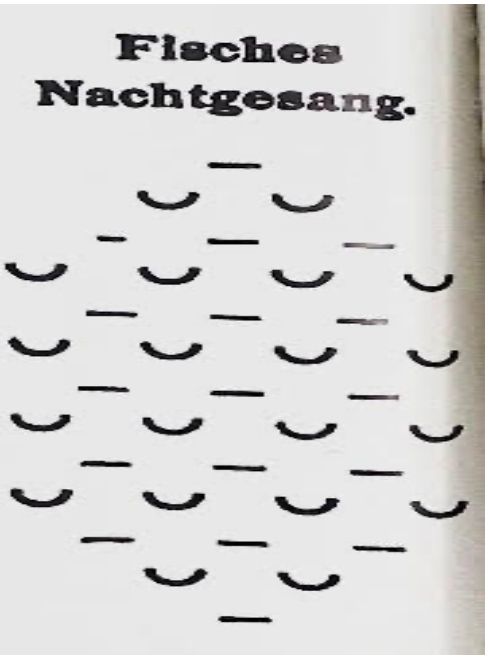
Guillaume Apollinaire. *Il Pleut*, 1916.

Photo: Krauss and Rowell, “Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields,” page 22.



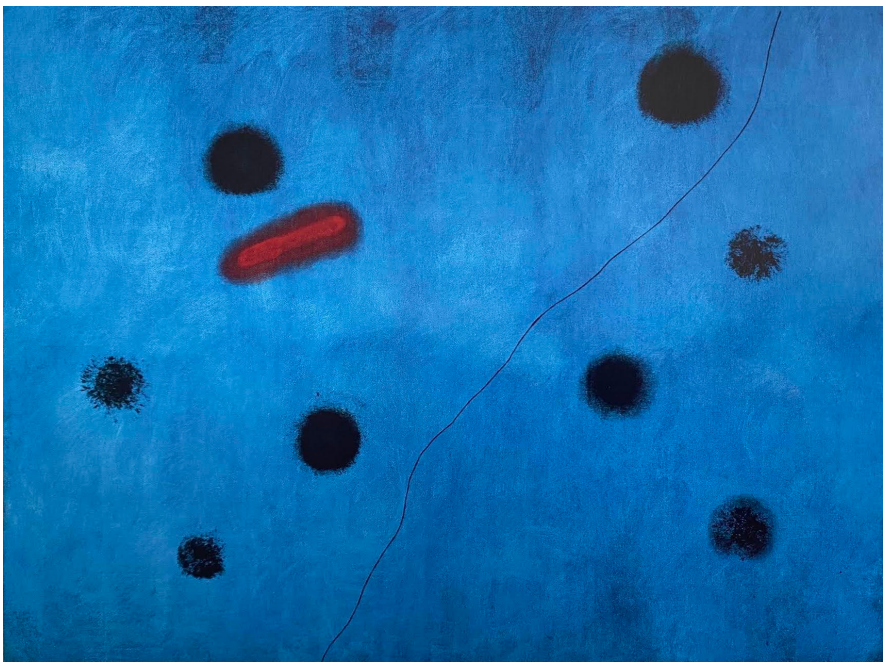
Joan Miró. “Photo: Ceci est la couleur de mes rêves” , 1925 Photo:

Rosalind Krauss and Margit Rowell, “Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields,” page 96



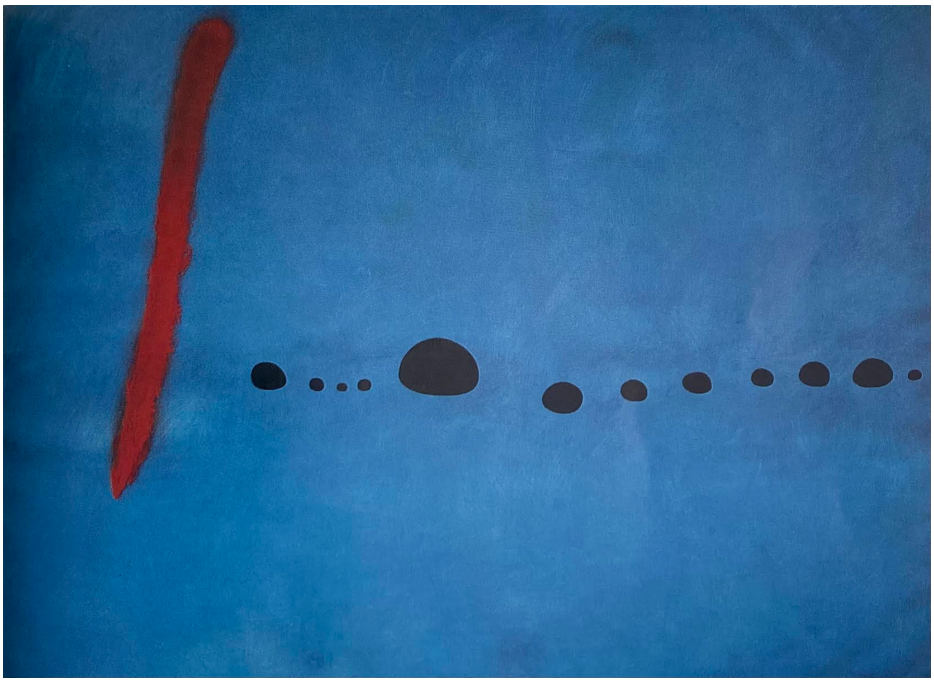
Christian Morgenstern. *Fisches Nachtgesang,* 1906.

Photo: Rosalind Krauss and Margit Rowell, “Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields,” page 26.



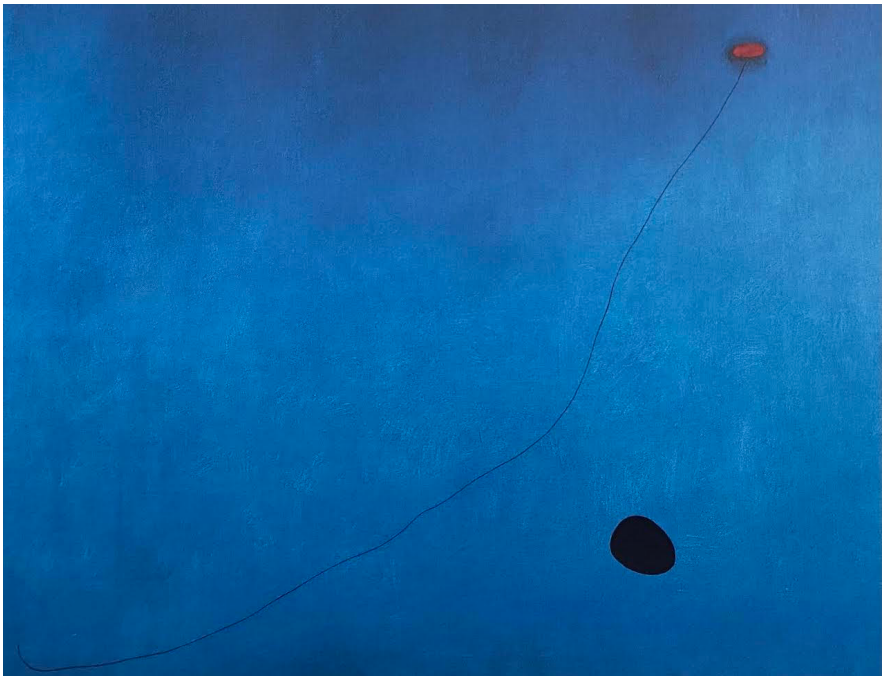
Joan Miró. *Blue I*, March 4 196, Oil on Canvas, 270 x 355 cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Photo: Marko Daniel and Mathew Gale," joan miró", page 196.



Joan Miró. *Blue II,* 1961, Oil on Canvas, 270 x 355 cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Photo: Rosalind Krauss and Margit Rowell, "Joan Miró; Magnetic Fields," page 131.



Joan Miró, *Blue III*, Oil on Canvas, 270 x 355, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Photo: Marko Daniel and Mathew Gale," joan miró," page 197.

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