The question of Pablo Picasso’s true identity is a burning issue in art historical research. Picasso is repeatedly reinvented when each Picasso abolishes the previous one: The formalist Picasso of Clement Greenberg and his followers was replaced by Patricia Leighton’s left-leaning, politically-oriented Picasso, only to be substituted by the Post-Structuralist Picasso and so forth. This tendency does not only reflect the changing trends of art history but, to my view, is also crucial to our understanding of the artist himself—Picasso the artistic chameleon. When questioning who the real Picasso is, the answer is whoever we want him to be. Picasso is the perfect surface onto which we project our fantasies.

Picasso’s stylistic diversity is the reason for such divergent interpretations of his work, which allow every scholar to prove the existence of his or her own Picasso. This diversity was explored by Rosalind Krauss in her work on Picasso through the postmodern concept of *pastiche* and more recently in Elizabeth Cowling’s comprehensive book, *Picasso: Style and Meaning.* The conclusion that can be drawn from these reassessments is that the traditional notion of style as a site of coherency and unity is a fictive attribute of the sovereign subject, in the hope of manufacturing a fixed and stable image of the self. In his work, Picasso freely shifts from one style to another, and by doing so he shatters the possibility for a cohesive definition of the self. For this paper, I read Brassai’s 1933 *Minotaure* photo essay as an early example of such understandings concerning the nature of identity as a whole that is always larger than the sum of its parts.

Debates concerning Picasso’s identity also existed during the artist’s lifetime. Picasso’s fiftieth birthday was marked by two events that cemented the aging artist as a...
painter of the highest caliber—a modern classic, a living ‘Old Master.’ On the 16th of June 1932, Picasso’s first full retrospective opened at the prestigious Galeries Georges Petit in Paris with a selection of two hundred and twenty-five paintings, seven sculptures, and six illustrated books. The exhibition presented a comprehensive account of Picasso’s career, defining the stylistic diversity of the artist as a quality, as the ultimate proof of his genius.ii The second event that marked this new stage in Picasso’s reception, and which coincided with the opening of the retrospective, was the publication of the first volume of Picasso’s *catalogue raisonné* by the publisher Christian Zervos. The publication of the catalogue raisonné, an honour never before awarded to a living artist, contributed to the marketing of Picasso as the living counterpart to the greatest artists of the past.iii

At the same time that Picasso’s work was gaining its classic status, different groups within the surrealist movement spurred a separate campaign and called Picasso their own: for the surrealists, Picasso was not another link in the art historical chain—an artist whose greatest achievements lay in, and in relation to, the past—but a contemporary artist whose work conforms with the most progressive and radical art of the time. André Breton, in his 1925 *Le Surrealisme et la peinture*, defined Picasso as the ultimate surrealist painter by his ability to make others see the surreal within the real, the marvelous within the everyday.iv

The renegade surrealists also appropriated Picasso for their own purposes. Picasso dominated *Documents*, the dissident surrealist journal edited by Georges Bataille, as more works by Picasso than any other painter illustrated the pages of this journal. This culminated in 1930, when a special issue was devoted to the artist with texts by Michel Leiris, Robert Desnos, and Bataille himself. In Bataille’s essay, *Rotten Sun*, the author
opposes Breton’s emphasis on sublimation through sexual desire, instead insisting on Dionysian terminology for the understanding of Picasso’s body of work. For Bataille, Picasso’s paintings generate a similar physical reaction to that of looking straight into the blinding sun, experiences he defines as a form of visual castration.\textsuperscript{v}

The different readings of Picasso’s oeuvre stress the inability to assign a fixed identity to the artist in the 1930s. In this paper, I claim that these conflicting interpretations played a significant role in Brassaï’s 1933 photo essay, published in the first issue of the avant-garde journal, \textit{Minotaure}. Whereas the declared objective of Brassaï’s photo essay was to reveal Picasso’s unknown body of sculptural work to the artistic world, my reading sees the goal of the photo essay as representing the inconsistencies in Picasso’s public persona.

My interpretation of the photo essay as an examination of the rift in Picasso’s identity is based on unpublished photographic materials that I uncovered in the archives of the Musée Picasso. In the photo shoot, I argue, Brassaï explored the tensions in Picasso’s self, which were later downplayed in the final photo essay. Using the unpublished photographs in addition to the published ones for my reading allows me to override the editors’ aims and to better present Brassaï’s original intentions.

The \textit{Minotaure} photo shoot took place in the winter of 1932 in three locations: Picasso’s sculpture studio in the barn of his recently-acquired château in Boisgeloup, the artist’s lavish apartment, and his painting studio. These choices of location enhance the rhetoric of revelation as they make public not only the sculptures that were previously unknown to the artistic world, but also the private quarters and working spaces of the artist. By depicting only the private realm, it is as if Brassaï is promising to reveal a ‘real’
Picasso, one that is never fully unveiled. Brassaï oscillates between two alternative answers to the question of Picasso’s identity and represents these two possibilities throughout the photo essay: Picasso as a bohemian who is linked to avant-garde artistic production, and Picasso as a bourgeois, who belongs to Parisian high society, and forms himself and his artwork in the model of past artistic greatness.

The meaning Brassaï assigned to each photo shoot’s location becomes apparent in a comparison between a photograph of Picasso’s apartment—which was edited out of the final photo essay—and another of Picasso’s painting studio. In the making of these photographs, Brassaï exploited the fact that Picasso’s apartment and painting studio were identical in shape and design, as they were located one above the other at 23 rue de la Boétie. The decision to organize both compositions around an elaborate fireplace with a large mirror above, emphasizes the differences between the studio and the apartment in their use, character, and by extension, representations of their dweller’s personality. In the photograph depicting the apartment, the apartment itself is at the center of attention, especially the high ceilings, bright space, lavish architectural elements, and interior décor. Picasso, his first wife Olga, and the Minotaure publisher, Tériade, are partly reflected in the mirror, and seem miniscule in comparison to the scale of the apartment. Even Picasso’s work is secondary to the apartment: the monumental Three Women at the Spring from 1921 is reduced to an element of interior design, by acting as a perfect complement to the lampshades—the folds of the painted garments refer to the lampshades’ shape and design. The photograph therefore depicts Picasso as bourgeois by highlighting his taste, material possessions, and the central place these objects occupy in
his life. One can speculate why this photograph was not selected by the Minotaure editors: it would appear in a lifestyle magazine, not an avant-garde journal.

In contrast, the photograph of the studio suggests a completely different Picasso: the studio’s dweller, unlike his bourgeois-double, shuns all middle-class status symbols. The decorative and architectural traits are overwhelmed by the mess, accumulation of dirt and rubbish, and the excessive collection of peculiar objects. Brassaï is especially interested in trash and obsolete material objects. Junk is central to this photograph: both as an artistic material (the cigarette-box construction on the mantelpiece) and the non-artistic accumulation of trash, which blocks the fireplace. Picasso himself does not appear in the photograph, but he is present through his creation: the paintings, sculptures, and mess, all of which are evidence of his creative process. The studio and its dweller therefore gain bohemian attributes, resulting from a blatant disregard for all that is proper.

In this comparison, the bourgeois Picasso and the bohemian Picasso are described as two separate entities in constant conflict; through their mutual existence they do not eliminate one another but, rather, reinforce one another. By distinguishing between the two Picassos, Brassaï questions the artist’s true identity at the time, but does not offer a unified, singular answer.

Another comparison evident in the photo essay pertains to Picasso’s working methods in which Brassaï exposes once again the inherent tension in the artist’s public persona. In the photograph Picasso’s Palette, three large pots of paint and many squeezed paint tubes litter the floor, which is covered with drips of paint. This testifies to the creative battle previously waged on that very site: an expressive struggle to create the
painting that is only partly visible in the photograph. The size of Picasso’s palette does not allow it to be the hand-extension that painters’ palettes usually are, comfortably adjusted to human scale. This colossal expansion of the artist’s tool is fundamental as it is joined by the rejection of an easel and the placement of the painting directly on the floor. Picasso’s working environment is completely altered by this unconventional, floor-size palette. An entire environment is offered here as a symbol for the artist’s uncompromising, original, and total approach to art production. The chaos Picasso leaves behind is charged with additional meaning when dirt and mess are again read as anti-bourgeois symbols. Therefore, the decision to zoom in on the palette while emphasizing the studio’s disorder functions as a rhetorical act, turning Picasso’s untraditional working methods into proof of his unassailable position within the avant-garde movement.

In the next page of the *Minotaure* photo essay, Brassaï makes a completely different assessment of Picasso’s working process when he argues that Picasso’s work originates from the legacy of Renaissance art. Brassaï juxtaposes two photographs, *L’étagère* and *La Fenêtre*, and as a result makes a statement concerning the primary position of reality in Picasso’s work. *L’étagère* depicts a shelf in Picasso’s studio that the artist assembled, where iron and glass objects are carefully organized according to their function: the left side of the shelf is devoted to sculptural objects and the right side is occupied by bottles of varying sizes and shapes. Six out of the eight sculptural objects on the shelf were made by Picasso when he experimented with the welding-iron technique, often described as the most radical of his sculptural practices. The shelf offers a kind of small-scale retrospective, its logic repeating that of the retrospective in Galeries Georges Petit, mentioned above. The assembled work similarly demonstrates the extent of
Picasso’s talent by showcasing his ability to move between different styles, techniques, media, and genres (still life, portraiture, and funerary monuments).

*La Fenêtre* seems to be utterly different from *L’étagère*: while the latter presents an indoor space and the objects that occupy it, the former depicts a view from Picasso’s studio window of the city’s rooftops and chimneys with the iconic *Tour Eiffel* vaguely seen in the background. However, when the two photographs are juxtaposed, an immediate compositional resemblance arises: both photographs share a comparable rhythm caused by the central horizontal division and its articulation by multiple repeated vertical elements. The rooftops become, like the shelf, a surface on which varying upright objects are placed. Another similarity is the resemblance of the shapes of the bottlenecks and caps to the chimneys. Comparing the material, Picasso’s choice of welded iron is similar to the iron construction of the *Tour Eiffel*, while the tower’s geometric language can be considered a reference to the style of some of the sculptural objects present in his studio as well.

This link between the two photographs repeats the traditional paradigm of artistic mimesis: art as a window to the world, a metaphor first articulated in Leon Battista Alberti’s 1434 seminal text, *De Pictura*. Here the window model is didactically exemplified by a view from a specific window and its varied influence on Picasso’s creative process. The photograph of the urban landscape therefore suggests an overly simplistic reading of the shelf, the objects on it, and its organization: Picasso sees, Picasso does. This set of photographs portrays Picasso’s working methods through Renaissance parameters and as a result defines the artist as operating according to traditional artistic logic and not as a committed member of the avant-garde.
Another example attesting to Brassai’s intentionally indecisive approach to Picasso is found in the fourteenth photograph of the *Minotaure* photo essay, a photograph of Picasso’s sculpture studio in Boisgeloup after dark. Picasso purchased Boisgeloup, the seventeenth century château forty-five miles northwest of Paris, in 1930—a purchase facilitated by his escalating status in the art world, which resulted in a concurrent increase in the value of his work.\textsuperscript{vi} The sculpture studio, located in the château’s barn, reenacted Bateau-Lavoir—the shabby, unheated, bohemian studio that Picasso occupied in his first days in Paris. In his book, Brassai writes of his working relationship with Picasso, stating that the artist took pride in his decision not to electrify the barn nor heat it.\textsuperscript{vii} By introducing this photograph, I argue that Brassai utilized the constructed bohemian traits of the studio in order to portray Picasso in a traditional art historical framework, which identifies the artist simultaneously as an ‘Old Master’ who engages with tradition and an avant-garde artist who violates past traditions and beliefs.

In *Boisgeloup After Dark*, the physical conditions of a lack of electricity, a single artificial light source, and the crowded organization of sculptures result in a dramatic atmosphere: the heavy shadows create a mysterious effect, as the sculptures appear to be creeping out of the dark. The arrangement of sculptures in this photo creates the impression of no order, no composition, ‘as-found’ by the photographer, as if we are looking at a corner of the studio that was chosen at random. Upon closer inspection, the logic of this apparently arbitrary composition surfaces: the sculptures are arranged in a semi-circle facing the central abstract figure. The clues to the staged nature of the composition are verified through comparison with other photos of the studio and its
contents, never before published or analyzed, from which we learn that the sculptures’ position was arranged for this photograph.

As all the sculptures were seen in previous photographs, then glorified for their stylistic innovation, the only novel factor is the light, its manipulation, and most importantly, the resultant chiaroscuro. The dramatic light specifically refers to a long-standing painterly tradition, seen in the work of Caravaggio and his Netherlandish followers, that was characterized by a transition from strong light to complete darkness (very often with the inclusion of the light source itself within the painting, seen here in the lamp hidden behind the watering can). The reference to this painterly tradition also brings to mind the conventional representation of the Nativity, which, according to the New Testament, took place at night in a barn with animals. Remembering the biblical allusion and the art historical tradition that emerged from it, the conditions in which the photograph was taken, together with the specific compositional arrangement of the sculptures in semi-circle and the presence of animal sculptures (one can see Picasso’s *The Rooster* peeking out from behind the abstract figure), the photograph loses its realistic nature and gains a symbolic overtone. Comparing this photograph to conventional representations of the Nativity scene on a thematic and compositional basis, I believe that the Christian reference plays a central role in understanding the image. The abstract figure gains importance due to its placement at the centre of the semi-circle. All the other sculptures are facing it, as if adoring it, and the nascent abstraction can be compared to the figure of the newly born Christ in the Christian tradition. Such a statement concerning the fundamental role of abstraction in twentieth century art, when delivered through a conventional religious formula, allows Brassai to present simultaneously the artist’s two
identities that were repeatedly constructed throughout the photo essay. On the one hand, this statement distances Picasso’s work from a vanguard framework as it contextualizes the artist as part of a long-standing representational tradition; on the other hand, the construction of the Boisgeloup photograph as a Nativity scene forms a sacrilegious statement that compares the inauguration of a new artistic style to the birth of the Christian messiah.

See installation photos and analysis of the exhibition in Cowling, Elizabeth, ibid, 14-15 and Richardson, John, with the collaboration of Marilyn McCully, *A Life of Picasso: The Triumphant Years, 1917-1932*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 473-490. Both writers emphasize Picasso's role as the curator of the show in deciding on the heterogenous hanging of the works, which promoted stylistic diversity instead of chronological consistency.

This format of Picasso’s catalogue raisonné with its illusion of all-inclusiveness—from the smallest sketch to the largest canvas—was previously solely devoted to past artists whose place in the artistic pantheon was long secure. Zervos’ introductory essay does not directly compare Picasso to the Old Masters, but to God due to his immense creativity. See Zervos, Christian. *Pablo Picasso—First volume*, (Paris, Cahiers d’art, 1932).


'I had scarcely finished when night fell, and it was impossible to see anything in the shed any longer. Picasso lit a big kerosene lamp. It seemed that there was no electricity in these outbuildings. He told us then that when he was surprised at work by the dusk he often went on by the light from this unsteady source. He was accustomed to it. As a young man, he had often drawn by the light of a candle stuck in the neck of a bottle.’ Brassaï, *Picasso and Co.*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1966, 19.