SCULPTURE AND
PHOTOGRAPHY
ENVISIONING THE
THIRD DIMENSION

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example is G. Rouhet, "De la nécessité de la culture physique," no. 2 (March 1904): pp. 28-9. Much of the mainstream press also was preoccupied with this issue. See, for example, L. Hugonnet writing in La France; reprinted in Bulletin de la Ligue Nationale de l'éducation physique, 1 (1888): p. 6. For discussions of degeneration in the context of the reform of the military, see A. Ehrenberg, Le Corps militaire (Paris: 1983).

4. For a discussion of conservative aesthetic theory in the period, see M. Malraux, Conservative Echos in fin-de-siècle Parisian Art Criticism (University Park: Pennsylvannia State University Press, 1992).


7. See "Que c'est-ce que la Culture Physique?" La Culture Physique, no. 2 (March 1904): p. 18.


11. For a defense of physical culture in these terms, see A. Somier, "Pas d'Anormaux," La Culture Physique, no. 13 (March 1903): pp. 1-2.


13. Physical culture enthusiasts could purchase molds of the arms of famous athletes, such as Sandow, Hackenschmidt, and Batta. See the advertisement published in La Culture Physique, no. 24 (December 15, 1903).


17. See Chéroux, "Les Hommes beaux," p. 4. Chéroux even went so far as to publish Sandow's measurements, which were described as "ideal."

18. For a discussion of how the photographic competitions worked, see La Culture Physique, no. 16 (June 1905): pp. 84-6.

19. Ibid., p. 85.


CHAPTER SIX

PAUL PARET

SCULPTURE AND ITS NEGATIVE

THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI

When I approached New York on the boat I had the impression of seeing my studio on a large scale. All the buildings look like these blocks. Thus was Constantin Brancusi quoted by a journalist during his visit to America in the fall of 1926. This statement has been connected to certain Brancusi photographs of various sculptures and blocks stacked in his studio that appear finely evocations of architecture or a city skyline. The significance of Brancusi's comment, however, extends well beyond such a formal comparison. How could Brancusi consider his studio on Impasse Ronsin in Paris, famed for its primitive simplicity and templelike solitude, analogous to the urbanism of Manhattan, the preeminent early twentieth-century icon of modernity? His comparison suggests instead that modern sculpture can function as a model for material and social organization "on a large scale" and intimates certain structural or procedural affinities between sculptural production and the modern metropolis. An assemblage of more or less repeated, regularized forms, Manhattan stands as a source, product, and symbol of industrialization and mass production. Likening the material of the sculptor's studio to the material forms of the metropolis, Brancusi's statement implies a problematic link between his sculpture and industrial culture - between the unique object handcrafted in the private space of the artist's studio and the industrially produced commodity for a modern urban public.

This link is examined in the following discussion of Brancusi's photography of his sculpture and studio in the 1920s. Brancusi began to use photography as early as 1905 as a practical way of keeping a record of his sculptures and marketing them to potential buyers. He did not begin to take his own photographs until sometime later, however, and only from the beginning of the 1920s did photographing his own sculpture become an important part of his work. The more than 700 negatives and 2,000 prints made by Brancusi include examples of conventional and manipulated photographs, as well as prints for study, documentation, promotion, exhibition, and publication. They are not, however, merely supplements to his sculpture or objective visual aids. Brancusi's photographs confront artistic prob-
Lens similar to those investigated in his sculpture and can be understood as an inquiry into the possibilities of sculptural representation in modernity. I would like to suggest that Brancusi's photographs explore the intersections of photographic and sculptural reproduction. They present a far more uncertain and sometimes antagonistic relationship between sculpture and photography than is normally assumed, one in which the photographs complicate the dialectic operating in his sculpture between the handcrafted art object and the mechanically produced commodity. The photographs thematize Brancusi's serial production and reproductive dissemination of his sculptures, as well as the dematerialization and spatial disorientation associated with their display. In this way, Brancusi's photographs reveal something of the precarious position of sculpture in the aesthetic theory and object world of modernity.

Because of photography's mechanical apparatus and historical connection to science, its use might be peculiarly suited, in fact, to dealing with the vexing issues of sculptural representation during the early twentieth century. Both photography and sculpture raise questions of their inherent realism as media, questions of tangible materiality for sculpture and of optical truth for photography. Both media also lend themselves to processes of reproduction. Although Brancusi always insisted that each of his sculptures was unique, his best-known works were made in numerous versions and in different materials over many years (e.g., six Endless Columns, eleven versions of Mademoiselle Pogany, and well over twenty versions of Bird in Space). At a basic level, the mechanical reproduction of the camera parallels Brancusi's serial reproduction of his sculpture. It was, moreover, the reproduction of his photographs in journals during the 1920s and 1930s that disseminated his work most broadly. Even the endless reproducibility of the core module of an Endless Column (which Brancusi maintained could be of any size and of any number of modules as long as it held to the proper proportions) corresponds to the infinite reproductive potential of photography.

It is not only the reproducibility of the photograph that is significant here, but also the way that Brancusi's images, such as his many photographs of his studio, use formal doublings and repetitions to thematize visually the processes of representation and reproduction. A circa 1921 photograph, composed along a diagonal axis from lower left to upper right, presents Mademoiselle Pogany II in both positive and negative variants (Fig. 6.1). A white marble version of the sculpture in the center of the image is echoed by a darker bronze version behind it and toward the right. Both sculptures have nearly identical orientations on their cubic bases. In the foreground, a large cylindrical base reappears just above and to the right; perhaps squatter with a slightly greater diameter, it is an effective double nonetheless. On top of this second cylinder rests the ovoid sculpture Beginning of the World (1920), whose white marble is inverted just behind it by the dark wooden Head of a Child (1913) and repeated again by the head of the sculpture Plato (1919-20) on the far left. Through repetition, doubling, and inversion, Brancusi's photograph of Mademoiselle Pogany II presents a model of artistic practice that hovers between individual creation and mechanical
repetition. These same devices with which Brancusi investigates sculptural production would be adapted a few years later by Surrealist photographers, such as Man Ray and Hans Bellmer, as a way of disrupting the unity and coherence of the visual field of photography. Brancusi too, as will be discussed later, sometimes used surface manipulations and printing defects to similar effect. Here, however, his repetitions serve less to disrupt the visual field than to question the status of the unique sculptural object. By treating sculptures, pedestals, and nonart objects in the same way, the photograph lacks a clear separation between art and object and suggests a certain instability in the status of sculpture.

The physical existence of sculpture in three dimensions and its consequent lack of illusionistic space long has been considered a fundamental handicap of the medium. By the middle of the nineteenth century, as Alex Potts has observed, there was a "growing awareness of...an irreducible tension between the material identity of a sculpture as object, and the phantasmatic projections that give it an immaterial imaginative resonance." In his review of the Salon of 1846, Charles Baudelaire made his well-known reference to sculpture as "boring" in comparison with the more imaginative and illusionistic art of painting. If for Baudelaire, in the mid-nineteenth century, the issue was "the potential confusion between modern sculpture and luxury commodity," for Brancusi in the 1920s, the problem had become rationalized into one of distinguishing his works of art from the mass-produced objects of modernity. Rather than eliciting comparisons to luxury objects, his work provoked charges of being industrially common. Brancusi's own comparison of his studio to an urban environment, quoted above, was made on a metaphorical and formal level, but for many others the association appeared much more concrete.

In 1927, a trial that has become famous in the history of modern art took place to determine whether a polished bronze version of Bird in Space was actually a work of art. When Edward Steichen arrived with the sculpture in New York in October 1926, having just purchased it from Brancusi in Paris, U.S. customs officials rejected its duty-free categorization as art and instead placed it in a miscellaneous category along with kitchen utensils and hospital equipment. During the trial, Brancusi spoke about the subtle distinctions among various versions and casts of his works that made them unique and about the painstaking labor invested in each. In a deposition given at the American consulate in Paris, he testified that he worked on his sculpture "personally by hand...No polishing machine or other machine was used." Brancusi reportedly refused for many years to keep any modern appliances in his studio. Man Ray recalled that "there was nothing in the studio that might have come out of a shop, no chairs or furniture," yet, he noted that Brancusi kept a variety of electrical tools hidden out of view in an alcove. The trial eventually affirmed the status of art for Bird in Space, scoring an important legal victory for artistic freedom. Nevertheless, the persistent association of Brancusi's sculptures with mass-produced machine objects—for example, the photographic analogy of Brancusi's The Newborn and a modern toaster in J. Gordon Lippincott's 1947 book Design for Business—was by no means a misreading. If Brancusi consistently claimed individuality and uniqueness for specific works, he was also clearly interested in exploring the forms of the mechanical world and the boundaries between art and object.

Traditionally and conventionally, the task of separating freestanding sculpture from the world around it is performed by the pedestal, which structurally supports the sculpture while elevating and distinguishing it from its surroundings. Brancusi, however, radically reworked the relationship of sculpture and base. He rearranged his works by placing different sculptures on the same base and, on occasion, by allowing the same object to function alternately as sculpture or base. At other times, he integrated sculpture and base so closely as to erode their hierarchical relationship. By underlining the distinction between sculpture and base and reinforcing the materiality of his sculpture, Brancusi questioned the relationship between art and object. In this, he was in accord with the widely held opinion of modernists in the 1920s that the common manufactured object, as much or even more so than the fine art object, was at the forefront of a new aesthetics of modernity.

At the same time, the materiality of sculpture remained a significant problem. As the "immaterial" media of photography and film came to play increasingly prominent roles in twentieth-century visual culture, sculptural representation was marked by crisis. How could sculpture, an art traditionally defined by mass and volume, participate in the emerging opticality of modernity or what László Moholy-Nagy, another sculptor turned photographer, labeled "the new culture of light"? Brancusi, like a number of other artists in the 1920s, looked toward transparency, kineticism, and light projection as the means of releasing the static materiality of traditional sculpture. For example, despite their significant differences, both Moholy-Nagy's Light-Space Modulator (1921-30) and Marcel Duchamp's Rotary Demisphere (1925) from his series of Precision Optics work by manipulating the tensions between the material apparatus and its optical perception or projection. In these works, the conventional sculptural performance between structure and surface and between mass and volume is disrupted by a new photographic and cinematic emphasis on the manipulation of perception. Brancusi's use of photography, like the high polish he gave his bronze sculptures, his occasional use of revolving bases, and his later experiments with film, belongs to this fundamental reexamination of sculpture. As vehicles for presenting or displaying sculpture, Brancusi's photographs should be understood in relation to the issue of bases in his work and to the problem of the sculpture's physical presence. More radically than a pedestal, a photograph can create an illusionary pictorial space for the freestanding sculpture and in this way suspend, at least temporarily, the certainty of the work's physical status. Presenting a series of visual distractions and disintegrations, Brancusi's photographs undermine the sculptural objects and disrupt their material integrity. It is in this sense that Brancusi's photographs work against his sculpture.

In a photograph of his 1927 bronze Bird in Space, the sculpture and its shadow are flattened onto a brightly-lit rectangular field, presented as an
internal representational surface, that echoes the camera's initial photographic reproduction of the sculpture (Fig. 6.2). Concurrent with this reproductive flattening, the glaring reflection on the upper portion of the sculpture corrodes and defaces its form, thus negating the role of sculpture as the arbiter of three-dimensional space. The area of the photograph most clearly articulated in three dimensions is not the Bird in Space but its base, while the sculpture itself becomes entangled in a formal game of positives and negatives, illumination and obfuscation. Brancusi further intensifies these effects in a negative image that he made of the same shot (Fig. 6.3). The disruptive reflection, now inverted to a black stain, spreads across the image and blocks the ability of the sculpture to reflect anything that could be read as space. If, in the positive print, the sculpture retains a degree of control over space through reflection and its modeled articulation in front of the curtain backdrop, the negative image all but destroys any spatial reading by collapsing the forms and shapes onto a single surface of geometric abstractions. Corroding both the sculpture and its photographic representation, the image works against an understanding of the sculpture as a discrete object and associates reproduction and destruction as constituent parts of artistic creation. Dissolving the distinction between the real and the illusory, the known and the unknown, Brancusi's photographs resist fixing the boundaries, properties, and functions of his sculptures and instead project their very ambiguous physicality.

**FIGURE 6.2**

If Brancusi often uses photography to dematerialize his sculptures, it is striking that he insists on the physicality of the photographs themselves. Through deliberately imperfect printing and the display of process, Brancusi emphasizes the physical qualities and material production of his photographs. In this way, the photographs work to disarm the rational precision and mass-cultural affiliations of the photographic process. When Brancusi decided to take his own photographs, he was determined to develop and print them as well, but his results were notoriously crude. Man Ray described them as "amateurish attempts." They were "out of focus, over or underexposed, scratched and spotty. This, he said, was how his work should be reproduced." Man Ray's use of the term *amateur* suggests more than simply untrained workmanship. It recalls the tradition of the nonprofessional gentleman photographer and, most important, conveys a sense of non-avant-garde resistance to the 1920s aesthetic of transparency and purity of surface. Many artists of the 1920s, although they disagreed on the precise role or even validity of photography within the fine arts, rallied behind the mechanical nature of the medium and the technological means it offered to expand sensory experience. Man Ray, for example, hailed the camera as "a marvelous explorer of those aspects that our retina never records."

Moholy-Nagy regarded photography as a technology that can "complete or supplement our optical instrument, the eye" and pursued it as a means of mechanically mediating the role of the artist's hand or eye.**

**FIGURE 6.3**
For Brancusi, however, the mechanical ease and technical precision of the camera contrasted sharply with the fundamental role in the creative process that he assigned to physical effort and material engagement. "Theories are worthless," he once declared, "it is only action that counts." On another occasion, he stated that "as the cobbler who makes boots, and the baker who kneads bread - I work on my objects myself." The embracing of crude printing techniques provided one way for Brancusi to try to practice photography in line with these dictums. The distracting surface quality of Brancusi's prints disturbs the uniform surface and abstracted space of photography, what one critic in the 1920s termed the medium's "optical neutrality."

This aspect of Brancusi's photographs - the rematerialized character of their surface and the display of process - also prevents them from being merely a return to a pictorialist aesthetic, a charge that might well apply to certain images of Brancusi's sculptures by other photographers. This point can be clarified by a comparison to Steichen's 1926-7 photograph of Brancusi's Bird in Space (Fig. 6.4). Staging the sculpture triumphantly within a tripartite projection of light, Steichen's photograph uniformly dematerializes Bird in Space, thus transforming the material sculpture into an immaterial spiritual vision. In Brancusi's own photographs of Bird in Space, however, the dematerialization is characteristically complicated by the display of physicality. The flattening play of sculpture and shadow within the image thematizes the process of photographic reproduction, and the array of both manipulated and accidental blemishes on the surface of the prints undermines the pictorial illusion of the photographs (see Figs. 6.2 and 6.3). There remains an unresolved tension in Brancusi's photographs between the corporeal sense of their production and the optical disintegration of their objects. Brancusi's deliberate, or at least welcomed, imperfection of manual skill is an integral part of the presentation of his sculpture and forms a counterpole to the immaterial character of the photographs and the mechanical ease of the camera.
platform for the display of photographic self-reflexivity. The photograph, in other words, draws limits. It constrains the spatial complexities of the sculpture within a rationalized order of geometric recessions. "Modern man," wrote Brancusi's friend Fernand Léger in 1924, "lives more and more in a preponderantly geometric order." The Newborn II appears here as a flattened composition of rectangles and ovals, not unlike the Purist paintings made by Charles-Edouard Jeanneret and Amédée Ozanam one or two years earlier.

Against such an aesthetic of rational clarity, however, the sculpture projects back something of the space and objects of Brancusi's studio. The camera exists both above the Newborn II and within it; the sculpture itself, also doubled, is imaged on the surface of the disc and beneath (or within) it. These reflections and their blurring of surface and depth and horizontal and vertical orientation obscure the physical boundaries of the discrete sculptural object. Moreover, photographed from above, the sculpture reflects the actual studio equipment that produces the de-materializing illusion. With their successive disintegrations and rematerializations, Brancusi's photographs articulate a contest of interdependence of reproduction and negation. Oscillating between spatial complexity and a compacted geometrical order and between the expansion of spatial perception and its flattening compression, the photograph enacts the conflict within Brancusi's work between sculptural three-dimensionality and two-dimensional surface effects.

A similar process seems to take place in a photograph of Princess X (c. 1930) (Fig. 6.6). Brancusi uses the shadow of the sculpture to replicate, undistorted, its negative profile. The theme of reproduction is figured again in the multiple reflections of space on the body of the sculpture. If one reads the sculpture as a torso, a studio lamp and skylight seem to be imaged on Princess X's forehead, neck, and breast. The highly polished reflective surfaces that Brancusi gives his bronzes extend their presence beyond the space physically occupied by the sculptures to the immaterial projection of space around them. Through these multiple reflections, Princess X, as a sculpture, rejects the photograph's flattening articulation of the silhouette and asserts its own more powerful (if ambiguously gendered) sexual fecundity through its ability to arbitrate spatial perception. Once again, however, the photograph works dialectically to contradict its own assertions. At the same time that the photograph presents a dynamic image of sculpture transcending its static material condition, it reveals, through reflected images of the camera, tripod, and lights, the studio devices that generate this aural illusion. While emphasizing the very indeterminacy and contingency of these always partially occluded spatial and physical relationships, the photographs reinforce both their character as made objects and Brancusi's performance as their maker.

The complexity of the relationship between individual handicraft and mechanical production in Brancusi's artistic process is revealed most powerfully in a circa 1924 self-portrait of Brancusi at work with an ax as he forms a wooden beam into an Endless Column (Fig. 6.7). In its striking...
series of oppositions between order and disorder and rationality and irrationality. Brancusi's photograph presents a conflicted model of the artist as producer. Brancusi's awkward position on the column and its incomplete rough-hewn modules contrast with the right-angle intersection of squared beams supporting him. The smoothness of the ax blade and the exactitude of its compasslike arc contrast with the irregular result of its impact. The figure of the ax itself, like The Sorceress (1916-24) standing above to the right, is at once precise, primitive, and threatening. The seriousness of Brancusi's labor also seems simultaneously mocked and empowered by The Sorceress watching over him. Except for the ax that Brancusi wields, nothing in the image can be considered complete or whole. Everything from the Endless Column and The Sorceress to the pair of small axes (lower left) and a faceless Brancusi is unfinished, partially occluded, or cut off.

The picture displays a circuit of looking perhaps even more complex than that in The Newborn II or Princess X. Within the image, Brancusi's sculpture The Sorceress watches over him, mimicking the position of both camera and viewer. Brancusi himself is caught between these spaces, virtually split by the diagonal line of the Endless Column. Hidden from view by the ax, Brancusi's face is made to match the smooth featureless face of The Sorceress. Like the image of the camera in the photograph of The Newborn and the faceless stare of The Sorceress here, the ax emphasizes vision while concealing the artist's eye. With a glancing cut, it redirects one's focus to Brancusi's downward swing and the rough unevenness of his ax blows that, like his homespun printing, would seem to strike against a rationalized notion of artistic production. As if in agreement with his declaration that “theories are worthless. It is only action that counts,” the image shows Brancusi embracing a primitive and elemental artistic process.

This enactment of visceral manual production, however, is deceptive. The initial appearance of spatial complexity and the seemingly ad hoc layout of the studio and its objects give way to an idiom of modern mechanical production. The beams that support Brancusi come together with the regularity of a grid and are echoed by the two axes lying across each other in the lower left of the image. The sharp edge of the ax blade forms an arc, a precise line that traces the path from the mind through the eye to the column. Brancusi stated: “A sculptor's tool is slow and solitary, he must have infinite patience.” Here, however, this process is radically compressed by the click of the camera into an instantaneous optical moment. Brancusi's insistence on unreflective physical labor is unwittingly inflected by the mechanics of the camera's production—the rhythmic swing of the ax tracing a compasslike arc to the regular succession of the column's emerging rhomboid modules. Synchronized to this rhythmic swing of the ax, the click of the camera's shutter stages what might be only a simulation of nontheoretical, individual craft within a society increasingly steered by forces of economic and social rationalization. Brancusi's myth of the simple craftsman reveals itself as a construct of technological precision and mechanical reproduction. The signs of resistance to mechanized production in this photograph—the ax, the rough-hewn Endless Column, The Sorceress, the stu-

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**FIGURE 6.7**

Constantin Brancusi, Self-Portrait, Working on an Endless Column, c. 1924, gelatin silver photographic print. [photographs © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ ADAGP, Paris]

dio surroundings, and the amateurish printing—are all absorbed and negated. What emerges instead is the rhythmic synchronization of the ax and the camera, the sculpture and its reproduction. Like the other photographs discussed in this chapter, this self-portrait exemplifies some of the contradictions in Brancusi's practice between the mechanical and the handmade. Manipulating notions of reproduction and negation, his photographs confront the persistent difficulties of sculptural representation and the position of the creative artist within a culture of mass production.

One might compare Brancusi's image with El Lissitzky's well-known 1924 photomontage Self-Portrait: The Constructor, in which a similar dialectic between industrial rationality and individual handicraft is expressed. On a background of graph paper with broad rectilinear lines and typographic elements in the upper and left-hand areas, Lissitzky superimposes a photograph of his head and face with an image of his hand holding a compass that seems to have just inscribed a circle on the squared paper behind it. Lissitzky overlays these images in such a way that his open hand appears to hold and reveal his eye at the center of the print. Symbolizing the collaboration of the mind, eye, and hand with the tools and techniques of modern engineering, Lissitzky embraces a new role for the artist as the constructor and engineer of a new culture and society. Whereas Lissitzky works a compass, however, Brancusi clutches his primitive ax with both hands. Almost concealing his face behind the ax, Brancusi emblues his physical, nonintellectual labor as though to claim that he can exist outside of the very conditions of modernity that Lissitzky embraces. The photograph, perhaps, tells the viewer otherwise.
NOTES

3. Brancusi lived and worked in Montparnasse at Impasse Ronsin No. 8 from 1916 to 1927, and then at Impasse Ronsin No. 11 from 1927 until his death in 1957. For a selection of the many firsthand descriptions of Brancusi's studio, see Anna C. Chave, Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), especially pp. 73-82.
5. See the comments on the supplementary or objective character of Brancusi's photography in Brown, Constantin Brancusi Photographer, p. 17, and Pontus Hulten, Natalie Damtrico, and Alexandre Istrati, Brancusi (New York: Harry Abrams, 1967), p. 16.
9. The initial serving was filed with the U.S. customs office by Steichen and Marcel Duchamp in January 1927. The trial started to occur in October of that year and did not conclude until November 1928. For the details of these events, see Chave, Constantin Brancusi, pp. 198-203, and Margit Rowell, Brancusi contre E.U.S.A., un process historique, 1928 (Paris: Arno Bruno, 1995).
13. See, for example, the discussions about Watchdog in Bach, Rowell, and Temkin, Constantin Brancusi 1876-1957, catalogue no. 65, p. 204-7, and Chave, Constantin Brancusi, pp. 109-11. Chave describes The Endless Column as a work that "could function as base, as sculpture, as architectural element, or as monument: almost all sculptural functions rolled into one. By making a sculpture that supported itself, or a base that was sculptural, Brancusi subverted the hierarchy of objects inherent in the mounting of sculpture." (p. 247). Also, see Bach, Constantin Brancusi, pp. 30-66, and Chave, Constantin Brancusi, pp. 218f.