



Eugène Druet

Eve

c. 1899 Cat. No. 4

"AN ALMOST IMMATERIAL SUBSTANCE": PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE DEMATERIALISATION OF SCULPTURE

Geraldine A. Johnson

Some of the earliest known photographs depict sculptural subjects.¹ But most of the photographs taken in the decades immediately following the discovery of the new medium served primarily documentary purposes. Only in the later nineteenth century did sculptors and photographers begin to explore how photography could be used not just to record the external appearance of three-dimensional objects, but also to question long-held assumptions about the art of sculpture itself. In fact, beginning with Auguste Rodin, a number of artists began to deploy the medium to explore the very nature of sculpture's materiality.

Rodin

From the mid-1870s onwards, Rodin actively incorporated photography into his artistic practices, with the medium becoming increasingly important in the design, marketing and documentation of his sculptural oeuvre.² His imaginatively varied use of photography became a model for both immediate contemporaries, such as Medardo Rosso, and somewhat younger artists working in the first decades of the twentieth century, including László Moholy-Nagy, Naum Gabo and Constantin

1. On the photography of sculpture, see: Geraldine A. Johnson (Ed.), *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension*, Cambridge 1998, esp. p. 16, n. 2, for further references; James Hall, *The World as Sculpture*, London 1999, pp. 325-347; and Dorothy Kosinski, *The Artist and the Camera: Degas to Picasso*, New Haven 1999, *passim*.

2. On Rodin and photography, see: Albert E. Elsen, *In Rodin's Studio: A photographic record of sculpture in the making*, Oxford 1980; Kirk Varnedoe, "Rodin and Photography", in A.E. Elsen (Ed.), *Rodin Rediscovered*, Washington D.C. 1981, pp. 202-247; Hélène Pinet, "'Montrer est la question vitale': Rodin and Photography", in Johnson, pp. 68-85; and Jane R. Becker, "Auguste Rodin and Photography: Extending the Sculptural Idiom", in Kosinski, pp. 91-115.

Brancusi. Photography, however, was not just a helpful, but humble tool. Rather, for Rodin and other photographically-oriented sculptors, the medium could also serve to redefine sculpture itself by transforming solid, palpable and static matter into an ever-changing illusion or, as Moholy-Nagy put it, into "an almost immaterial substance."³ Indeed, for some artists, photography seemed capable of liberating sculpture from its very materiality.

Rodin was often actively involved in stage-managing photographic shoots. In the case of Eugène Druet, one of his favourite photographers at the turn of the century, Rodin (who apparently never took a single photograph himself) encouraged his assistant to record works such as the **Eve** from the **Gates of Hell** from the back and side in a mysteriously shadowed, disembodied half-light⁴ (cat. nos. 3 and 4). Especially in Druet's back view, the figure of Eve seems to dissolve into her penumbral surroundings, as if on the verge of dematerialising into the 'silence which surrounds things' that Rodin's works evoked for the poet Rainer Maria Rilke.⁵

Or could the incorporeal silence felt by Rilke, who served as Rodin's personal secretary, have been at least partially the result of looking at photographs of the sculptor's figures, rather than at the works themselves? Even more intriguing is the possibility that Rodin himself may have pursued an increasingly dematerialised sculptural style in part thanks to the photographs he encountered, one medium thus reinforcing the aesthetic tendencies of the other. The impact of photographs is incontestable in the case of the writer Charles H. Caffin, who, in 1909, based his reaction to Rodin's controversial statue of Balzac on photographs which captured the "silence [that] renders audible the footfall of incorporeal presences: the shadow seems to be the substance."⁶

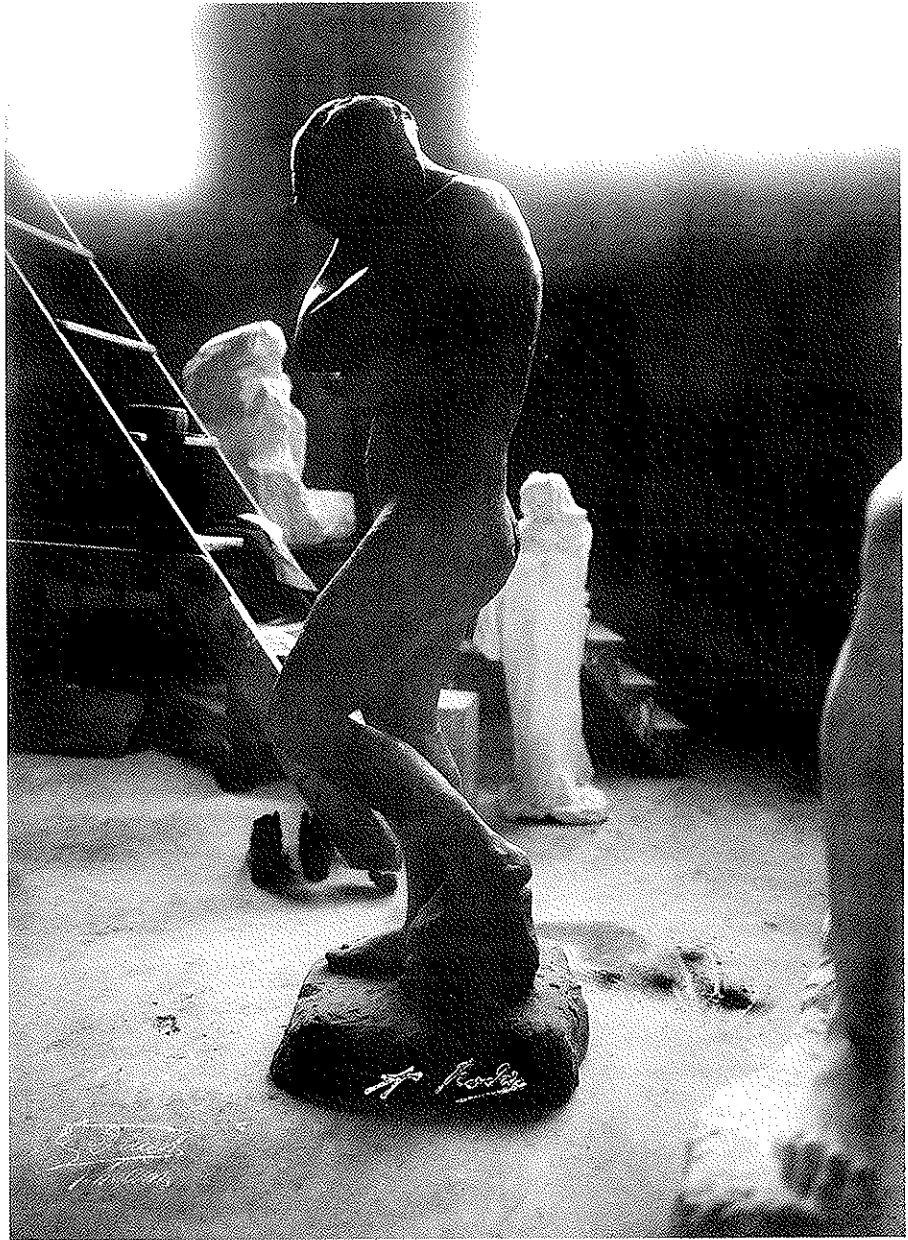
The photographs seen by Caffin were the result of a collaboration between Rodin and the young American photographer Edward Steichen. Although Druet had already depicted the **Balzac** as a shadowy figure emerging from the studio's crepuscular darkness, Steichen's roughly-textured prints went even further in

3. Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, London 1985, p. 306.

4. On Druet, see Varnedoe, pp. 205-206 and 215-224, and Pinet, pp. 76-77.

5. Alex Potts, "Dolls and things: The reification and disintegration of sculpture in Rodin and Rilke", in J. Onians (Ed.), *Sight & Insight: Essays on art and culture in honour of E.H. Gombrich at 85*, London 1994, p. 367.

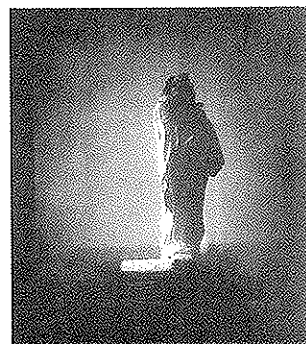
6. Becker, "Rodin", p. 104.



Eugène Druet

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c. 1899 Cat. No. 3



Edward Steichen, three photographs of Rodin's *Balzac*, 1908
(from the left: 'Toward the Light, Midnight', 'The Silhouette, 4 a.m.' and 'The Open Sky').
From *_Camerawork_*, 1911

undermining the fixed, material reality of the statue. Apparently at Rodin's suggestion, a plaster cast of the Balzac was dragged into the garden, set on a rotating platform and photographed by Steichen over the course of two long, sleepless nights. The stunning results were pared down to three key images arranged in a temporal and kinetic sequence running from midnight to dawn and moving around the figure.⁷ These images transformed the statue first into a disembodied ghost, then into an inky black silhouette with no recognisable relation to the actual white plaster cast. Photography's ability to transform the very materials of sculpture is also seen in photographs of Rodin's **Burghers of Calais** taken by Jean-François Limet, a studio assistant (cat. nos. 6 and 7). Once again, the slightly unfocused lens and rough surface textures of the prints leave viewers uncertain as to whether the hazy, mysterious figures are cast in dry white plaster or dark gleaming bronze.⁸

The grainy, often technically imperfect and highly atmospheric photographs taken by Druet, Steichen and Limet in many ways recall the unfinished surfaces, purposefully preserved imperfections and serial reworkings that were the hallmarks of Rodin's own sculptural style. Indeed, his obsession with endlessly revising and replicating sculpted works in different media with only slight variations in surface texture and scale found its perfect echo in the disembodied and endlessly mutable figures that populated the photographs he most admired.

7. On these photographs, see Varnedoe, pp. 229 and 235-238.

8. As noted by *Ibid.*, p. 242.

Rosso

At least one disgruntled contemporary was convinced that his own example lay behind the dematerialising tendencies of Rodin's sculptural practices and photographic preferences. Indeed, the Italian sculptor Medardo Rosso became convinced that his 'Impressionist' sculptures in wax, plaster and bronze had inspired Rodin's most innovative works, including the **Balzac**.⁹ Rosso and Rodin initially had been friendly, mutual admirers. By 1904, however, six years after the **Balzac's** unveiling, Rosso had had enough. Certain that this statue owed much to his own stylistic proclivities, Rosso assembled a small group of sculptures and photographs for display at the Salon d'Automne in Paris. Amongst the latter were photographs of works by him and by Rodin, including the **Balzac** captured in a deeply shadowed print by Druet.¹⁰ The Italian sculptor's suspicion that his much better-known colleague was appropriating his sculptural strategies without due acknowledgment is suggested by the note Rosso scribbled alongside a photograph of this curious multi-media ensemble: "Confrontation at the Salon, Paris."¹¹

Presumably, Rosso believed that a visual (as well as virtual) confrontation with his famous rival effected in large part through the medium of photography would prove his point, namely, that his example had pushed Rodin to develop a dematerialising sculptural style that allowed beholders "to forget matter."¹² However, one could argue that Rosso's sculptural style was itself, to some extent, the product of the dematerialising *photographs* taken of his own works. Although there has been some debate as to whether all the photographs associated with Rosso were actually taken by his own hand, there is no doubt that, unlike Rodin, he was a very active photographer.¹³ The resulting images made his already highly-textured sculptures seem to dissolve completely into a misty, nebulous haze.

9. On Rosso, see: G. Moure (Ed.), *Medardo Rosso*, Santiago de Compostela 1996; Jane R. Becker, "Medardo Rosso: Photographing Sculpture and Sculpting Photography", in Kosinski, pp. 159-175; and Harry Cooper and Sharon Hecker, *Medardo Rosso: Second Impressions*, New Haven 2003. I would like to thank Michael Archer for kindly lending me his copy of Moure's catalogue.

10. The Druet photograph is illustrated in Varnedoe, p. 221, fig. 9.28.

11. See Sharon Hecker, "Reflections on Repetition in Rosso's Art", in Cooper and Hecker, pp. 64-67, and Becker, "Rosso," pp. 167-168.

12. Moure, p. 130.

13. On the attribution of Rosso's photographs, see: Luciano Caramel, "Identity and Current Relevance of Medardo Rosso", in Moure, p. 106, and Becker, "Rosso", p. 159.



Medardo Rosso (attributed), three photographs of *Ecce puer*, c. 1906. (Museo Medardo Rosso, Barzio)

The photographs taken of Rosso's **Ecce puer** (Behold the child) in c.1906 demonstrate his consciously dematerialising photographic practices, with the prints' technical imperfections mirroring the accidental flaws and blemishes he also relished in his sculpted works.¹⁴ The bust was apparently conceived after Rosso caught a glimpse of a young boy pressing his face through a thin curtain. This fleeting impression of a veiled being is hauntingly evoked by the indistinct surface textures of the sculpture. But the effect is heightened when the bust is seen through yet another veil, that of the photographic medium. Like Rodin, Rosso used dematerialising photographs of such objects to create new, virtual variations of a work that itself had been cast in multiple versions.

At the same time that Rosso's impressionistic photographic style gave him the freedom endlessly to revise sculptural compositions, like Rodin, he too jealously guarded the right to oversee the nature of these variations. Rodin insisted on approving and eventually co-signing all photographs issued by his studio photographers.¹⁵ Similarly, Rosso stated in a letter of 1926: "I cannot allow other photographs to be taken. I want those of mine and no others. I also believe these are the best."¹⁶

14. On this composition, see Harry Cooper, "Ecce Rosso!", in Cooper and Hecker, pp. 14-15, and Hecker, pp. 51-54.

15. See Elsen, 1980, p. 14.

16. Moure, p. 299.

Throughout his life, Rosso repeatedly claimed that "material does not exist ... Nothing is material in space."¹⁷ However, it was only thanks to his manipulation of the photographic medium that his complex sculpted objects managed to shed their material qualities and be transformed into a series of disembodied 'impressions'. Indeed, it was the shadowy impression of a sculpture, best captured in photographs, rather than the solid, physical object itself that ultimately most fascinated Rosso: "That shadow on the ground is more important than the shoes. So let's deal with the shadow and forget the shoes."¹⁸

Moholy-Nagy

By the time Rosso died in 1928, photography's ability to materialise the impalpable, while simultaneously dematerialising what was solid and real had fired the imagination of a new generation of sculptor-photographers. One of the most successful in articulating such ideas was the Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy.¹⁹ In 1927, he confidently stated that photography gave "tangible shape to light" itself.²⁰ Moholy-Nagy was well aware, however, that photography could also dematerialise any three-dimensional object it encountered. For Moholy-Nagy, this paradox seems first to have become apparent in 1922 when, in collaboration with his first wife Lucia, he began developing a new photographic technique he dubbed the 'photogram', the "most completely dematerialized medium" (cat. nos. 43-54).²¹

Unlike conventional photography, which relied on light passing through a camera's aperture, a photogram was made by allowing light to strike small, solid objects placed directly on light-sensitive photographic paper.²² For Moholy-Nagy, photograms effectively gave a fixed, material presence to light itself, while denying the specific materiality of the objects used in the process. Significantly, in a note scrawled on the back of a photogram made in about 1924, Moholy-Nagy stated that

17. For instance, see *Ibid.*, p. 171.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

19. On Moholy-Nagy, see: Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy. Experiment in Totality*, Cambridge, Mass., 1969; Andreas Haus, *Moholy-Nagy: Photographs and Photograms*, trans. F. Samson, London 1980; Passuth; and Eleanor M. Hight, *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar German*, Cambridge, Mass., 1995.

20. Christopher Phillips (Ed.), *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, New York 1989, p. 85.

21. Passuth, p. 326.

22. On camera-less photography, see: Haus, pp. 13-25; Hight, pp. 57 ff; and Michel Frizot (Ed.), *A New History of Photography*, Cologne 1998, pp. 442-446.

he had used napkin rings and matches to generate the image, then asked: "But is that important in the end? How the light flows ... and what becomes of the whole has nothing anymore to do with the original material."²³ By using multiple light sources when producing a photogram, the silhouetted shape of the 'original material' could be doubled and dislocated, an effect similar to some of the abstract, black-and-white intaglio prints Moholy-Nagy also made in the early and mid-1920s (cat. no. 41).

In his sculptural constructions and mobile multi-media installations, Moholy-Nagy further explored the possibilities of using light as a 'medium of plastic expression' and, conversely, of transforming plastic material into 'light compositions', the latter phrase used in reference to the transparent Plexiglas constructions he produced in 1946, the last year of his life (cat. nos. 57 and 58).²⁴ Interestingly enough, such complex exchanges between two and three dimensions, between motion and stasis, between transparency and opacity were often realised or at least confirmed through photography and, occasionally, in film, as seen in the case of a rotating sculpture known as the **Light-Space Modulator**, first conceived by Moholy-Nagy in 1922, then photographed and filmed by him when finally completed in 1930.²⁵

Gabo

The notion that photography and film can transform the material into the immaterial and back again also permeates the work of the Russian artist Naum Gabo.²⁶ In the case of Gabo's **Kinetic Construction (Standing Wave)** of c.1919-20, a piece that consists of a vibrating vertical metal rod, Moholy-Nagy observed that a "blurred photograph" of the work showed "several phases of motion superimposed. (What would elsewhere be regarded as an unsuccessful photograph is in this instance a good demonstration of the processes of motion, of the resulting virtual volumes.)"²⁷ (cat. no. 25). Ironically, these 'virtual volumes' are perhaps *most* evident

23. Katherine Ware, Introduction, *László Moholy-Nagy: Photographs in the J. Paul Getty Museum*, Malibu 1995, p. 12.

24. Passuth, pp. 292 and 383.

25. On this project, see: Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1977, pp. 206-213; Passuth, pp. 53-56; and Ware, pp. 80-83.

26. On Gabo, see: Steven A. Nash and Jörn Merkert (Eds.), *Naum Gabo: Sixty Years of Constructivism*, Munich 1985; and Martin Hammer and Christina Lodder, *Constructing Modernity: The Art & Career of Naum Gabo*, New Haven 2000.

27. László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: From material to architecture*, trans. D.M. Hoffmann, New York 1932, p. 127.

when looking at a photograph of the sculpture, which permanently fixes the object's full range of oscillation, rather than when standing before the work itself.

From the mid-1920s onwards, Gabo began to use transparent and translucent materials such as Plexiglas and nylon filament in his sculptures (cat. nos. 26-29). These works on the one hand seemed dematerialised due to their lack of solid or opaque surfaces, while on the other hand, allowed light itself to be fixed into a permanent plastic form thanks to the light-'trapping' properties of the reflective materials used. Once again, however, this paradox is perhaps more apparent in *photographs* of Gabo's works than in the physical objects themselves. Especially when photographed against a black background, the bright lines of light that pick out the sculptures' edges, curves and strings seem to reduce the three-dimensional objects to linear tracings that echo his wood engravings²⁸ (cat. nos. 30-36).

Even more striking are the similarities the prints and the photographs of his sculptures have with photographs taken by Gabo in 1941 of moving, abstract patterns of light (cat. nos. 37 a-e). Already in 1923, Moholy-Nagy had toyed with the idea of photographing light beams projected onto a screen.²⁹ Gabo was inspired actually to take such photographs in part by his slightly earlier experiments with similarly twisting and curving forms in the translucent sculptures he designed in the later 1930s. The light-photographs, in turn, seem to have given further momentum to his interest in exploring spiral shapes in three-dimensional media in the following years as seen in his **Spiral Theme**, another example of the materialising, dematerialising and rematerialising exchanges that could occur between two- and three-dimensional works of art³⁰ (cat. no. 28).

Brancusi

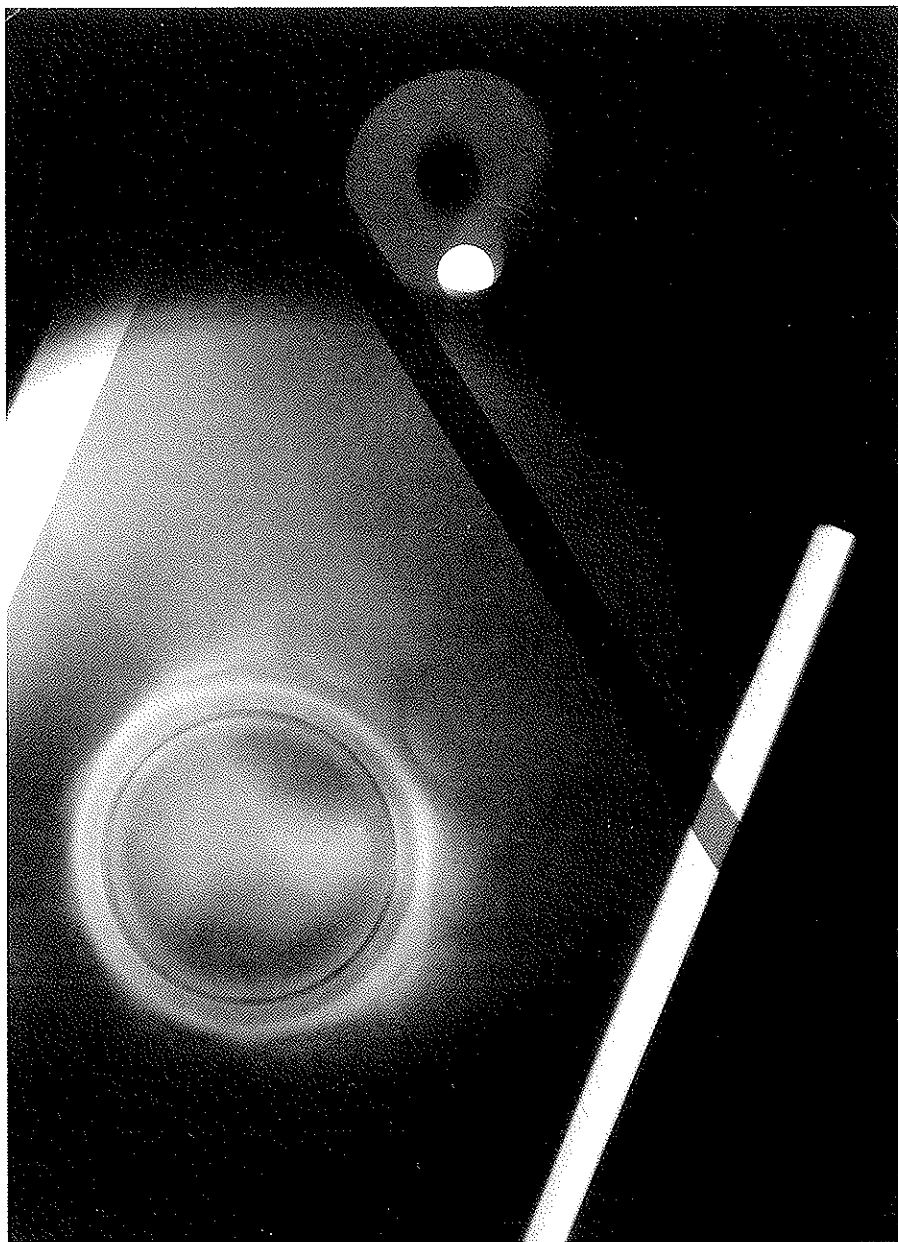
While Gabo only occasionally took photographs, the Romanian artist Constantin Brancusi repeatedly photographed his own sculptures and studio environment.³¹ Like Rodin and Rosso, both of whom he seems to have known, Brancusi was highly

28. On Gabo's monoprints, see Hammer and Lodder, pp. 328-330.

29. See Haus, pp. 16-17.

30. See Hammer and Lodder, pp. 279-81.

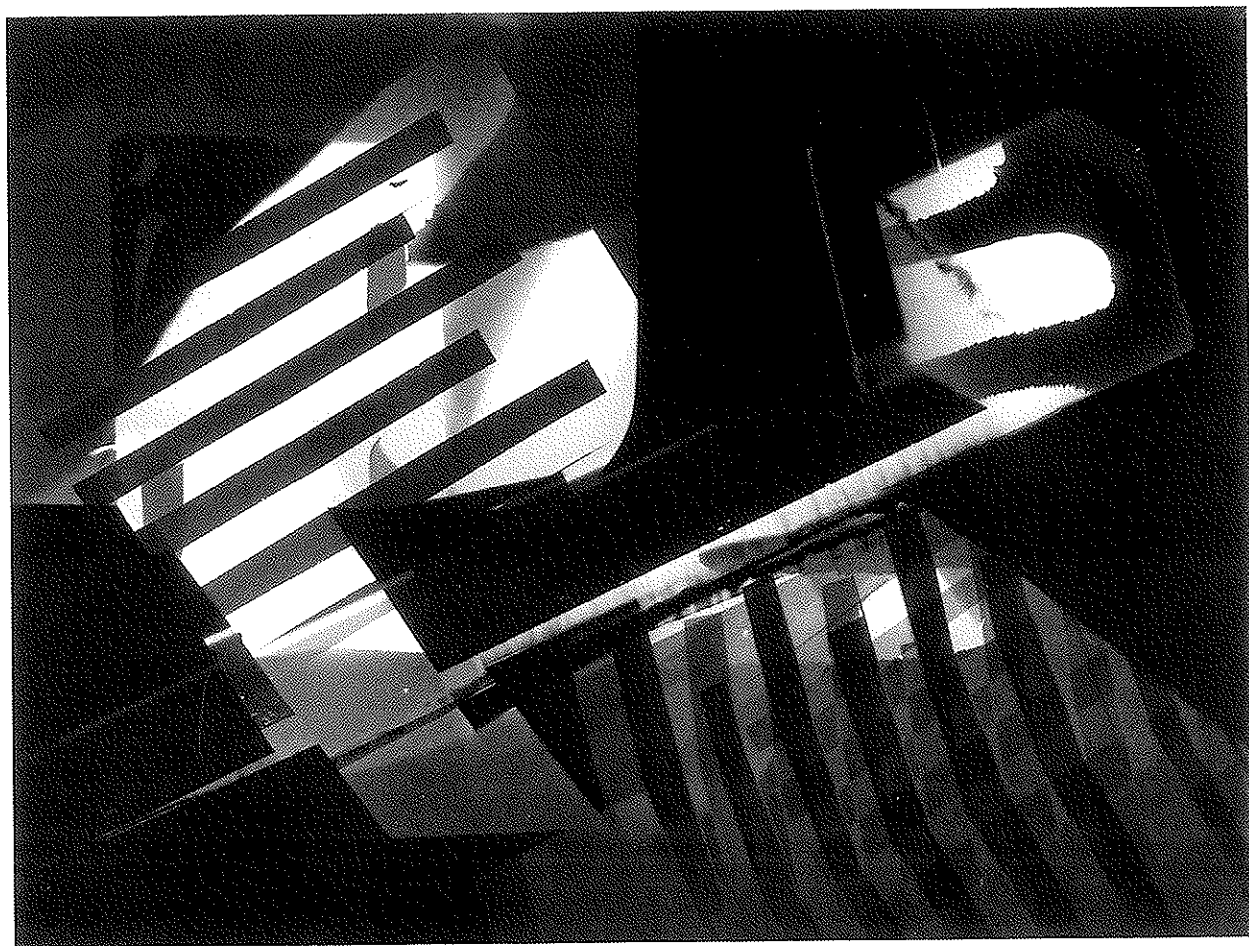
31. On Brancusi as a photographer, see: Marielle Tabart and Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, *Brancusi Photographe*, Paris 1977; Friedrich Teja Bach, "Brancusi and Photography", in F.T. Bach, M. Rowell and A. Temkin (Eds.), *Constantin Brancusi: 1876-1957*, Cambridge, Mass., 1995, pp. 312-319; Paul Paret, "Sculpture and Its Negative: The Photographs of Constantin Brancusi", in Johnson, pp. 101-115; and Elizabeth A. Brown, "Brancusi's Photographic In-Sights", in Kosinski, pp. 266-285.



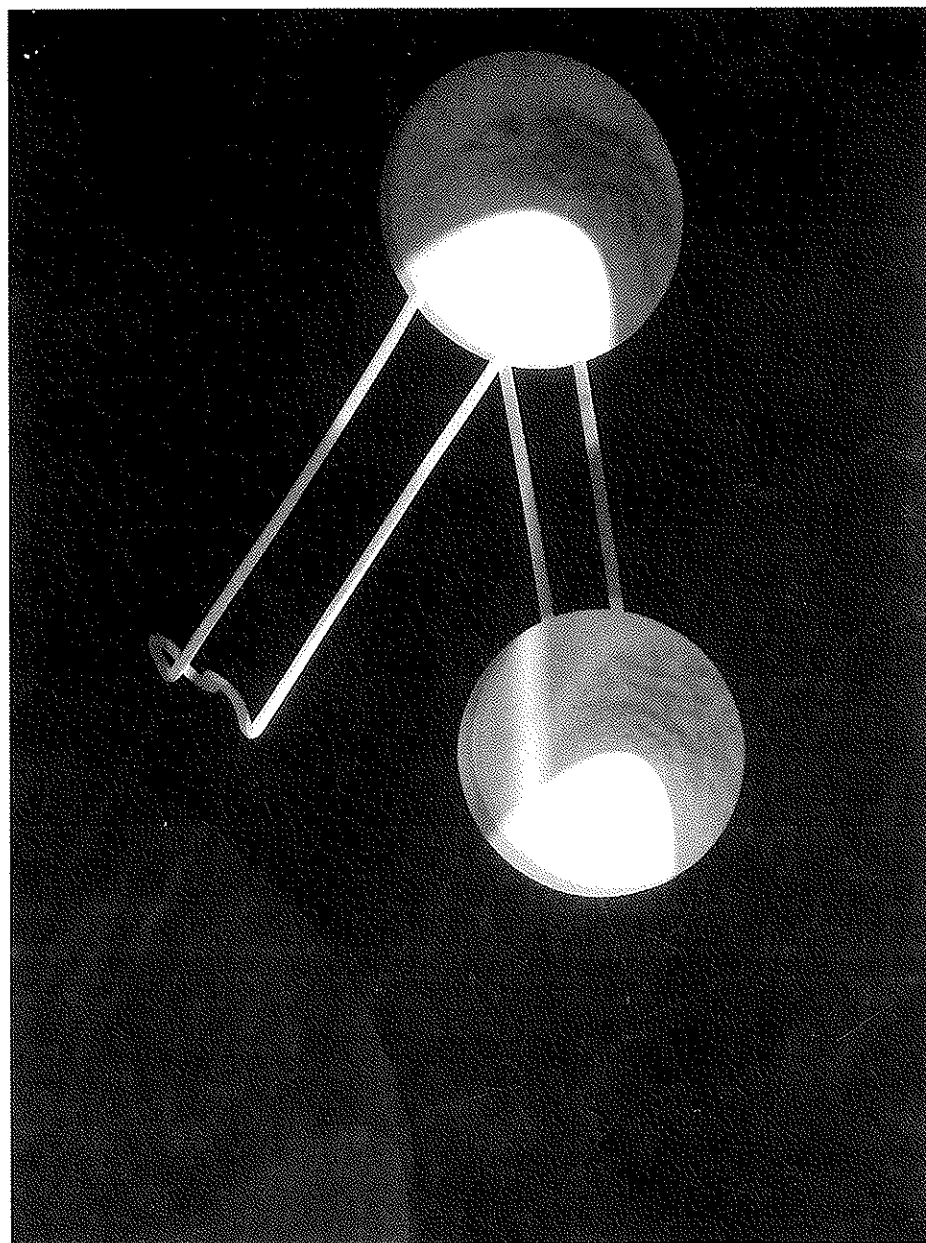
László Moholy-Nagy
Untitled photogram
c. 1922-5 Cat. No. 45



László Moholy-Nagy
Untitled photogram
1939 Cat. No. 56



László Moholy-Nagy
Untitled photogram
1923 Cat. No. 46



László Moholy-Nagy
Untitled photogram
1925-28 Cat. No. 53

sensitive as to how and by whom his works were photographed.³² From the 1920s onwards, after seeing photographs by Alfred Stieglitz, Brancusi had insisted that he alone should photograph his sculptures. The artist Man Ray described the defining episode as follows: upon seeing a Stieglitz print of one of his sculptures, Brancusi admitted that it "was a beautiful photograph, ... but it did not represent his work. Only he himself would know how to photograph it [The prints he subsequently made] were out of focus, over or underexposed, scratched and spotty. This, he said, was how his work should be reproduced. Perhaps he was right—one of his golden birds had been caught with the sunrays striking it so that a sort of aurora radiated from it, giving the work an explosive character."³³

The photograph seen by Ray must have been of a bronze version of Brancusi's **Bird in Space**, a composition he repeatedly photographed in the later 1920s and early '30s with 'explosive' bursts of light (cat. nos. 19-23). The photographic imperfections noted by Ray recall the blurred and grainy prints associated with Rosso and Rodin. Unlike these artists' photographs, however, Brancusi's prints were in sharp contrast to the slippery-smooth, glistening surfaces of his actual sculptures. Indeed, **Bird in Space** was so perfectly polished that, in 1926, a U.S. customs clerk had tried to have the piece taxed in the same category as machine-made metal kitchen utensils and hospital supplies.³⁴ Although the rough and uneven surface effects of Brancusi's photographs seem, at first glance, completely estranged from those of his sculptures, they were both the result of a laborious process of hand-crafting and finishing undertaken by the artist himself.

While most 'professional' photographs of Brancusi's works emphasise their immobile and impenetrable materiality, his own prints make it clear that he did not perceive his sculptures to be stable, solid, static objects. In his photographs of **Bird in Space**, flashes of light dissolve the dense, unitary wholeness of the sculpture at various points along its long, slim shaft (cat. nos. 19, 20 and 22). Another tactic was to use one or two light sources to illuminate the piece and cast shadows, as also seen in Moholy-Nagy's photograms (cat. no. 23, and see nos. 19 and 20). The resulting images could make the actual material object difficult to distinguish from

32. Brancusi may have worked briefly in Rodin's studio in 1907 and definitely exhibited with Rosso in 1906. See Krauss, p. 293, n. 13, and Sidney Geist, "Rodin/Brancusi," in Elsen, 1981, pp. 270-273.

33. Bach, p. 319, n. 19.

34. On this episode, see Anna C. Chave, *Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art*, New Haven 1993, pp. 198-249.

its shadowy and dematerialised *Doppelgängers*. Brancusi printed both 'negative' and 'positive' photographs of this work as well, further disorienting and destabilising viewers.³⁵

Brancusi also occasionally deliberately double-exposed photographs, thereby dematerialising his sculptures by making them appear to vibrate in space and time.³⁶ At first sight, such double-exposures recall photographs taken of Gabo's oscillating **Kinetic Construction**. Now, however, it is the camera, rather than the sculpture, that moves. But in both cases, photography introduces an element of time and a sense of motion into the traditionally monolithic and firmly-fixed art of sculpture. In an echo of Moholy-Nagy's rotating **Light-Space Modulator**, Brancusi displayed a gleaming bronze cast of the **Leda** on a mirrored turntable, effectively doubling the composition, and then filmed and photographed it from various angles (cat. nos. 17 and 18). In using two-dimensional media to dematerialise by visual means a solid, sculpted object, Brancusi thus generated new and ever-changing variations of a work that itself existed in multiple versions.

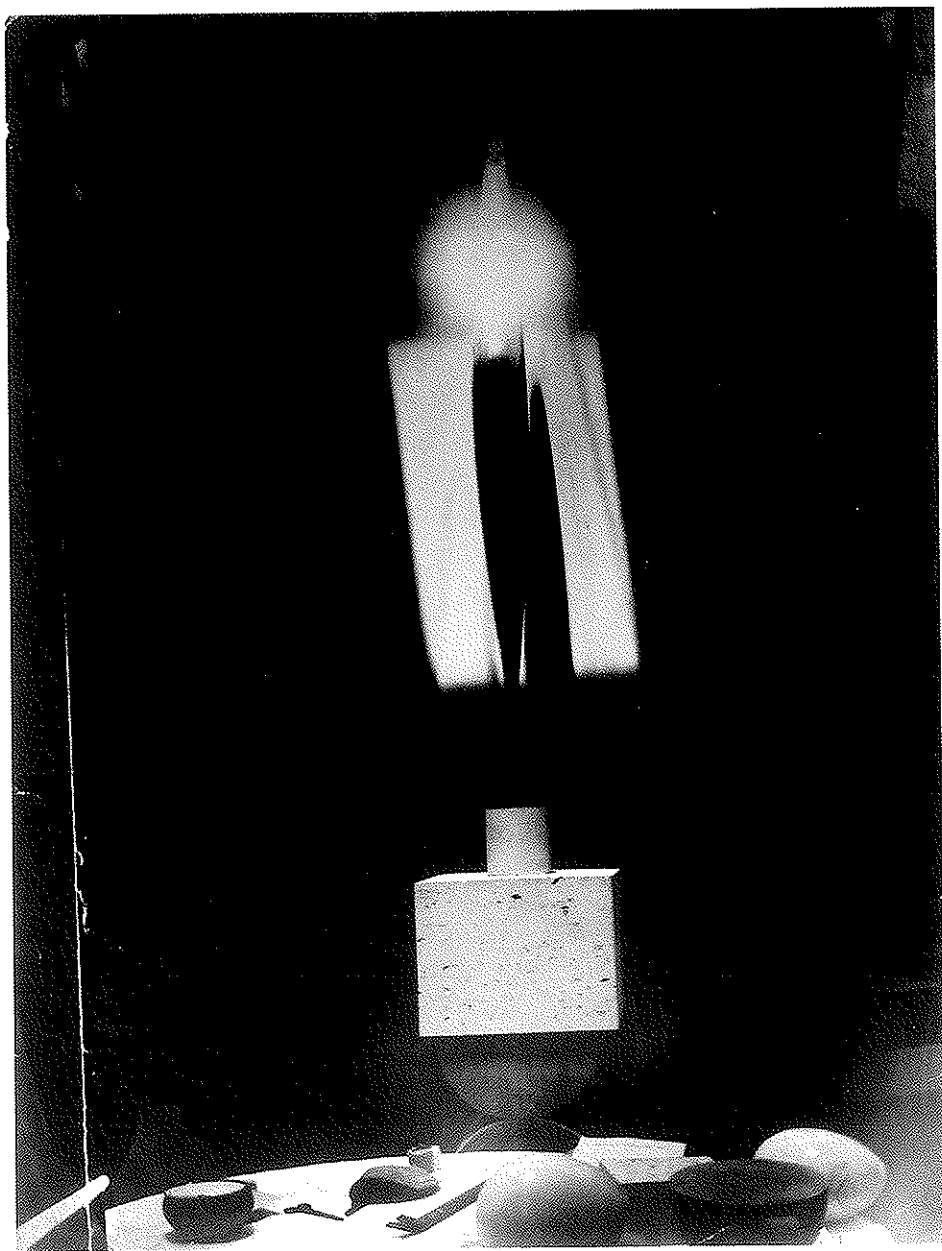
Conclusion

In 1949, Brancusi asked: "Why write [about sculpture]? ... Why not just show the photographs?"³⁷ Although all the artists considered here did discuss their work in words, it was often through photographs and, occasionally, film that they most eloquently defined a new kind of sculpture unshackled from the constraints of time, space and materiality. Often using new techniques and unexpected materials in both their sculptural and photographic practices, artists from Rodin to Brancusi skilfully deployed two-dimensional media to rework their three-dimensional compositions, in the process creating dematerialised and constantly-changing versions of their designs while, paradoxically, giving a fixed and permanent form to light, motion and even time itself. Through an almost obsessive desire to control the visual (re)presentation of their work and their inspired use of photographic media, these artists insured that sculpture would no longer be limited to solid, static, impenetrable objecthood, but rather could be magically transformed into 'an almost immaterial substance'.

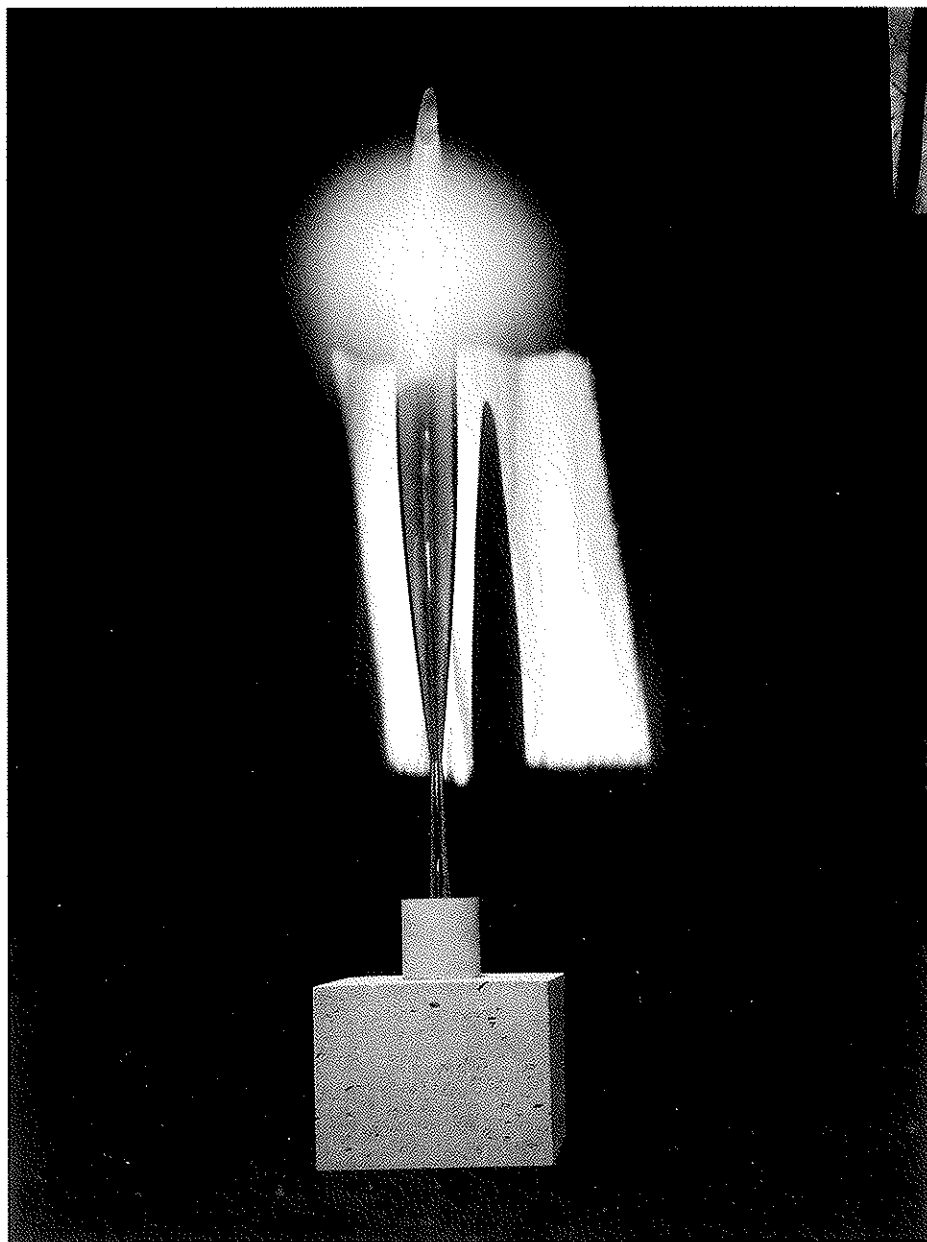
35. See Paret, p. 106.

36. See, for instance, Bach, p. 355, cat. ill. 191.

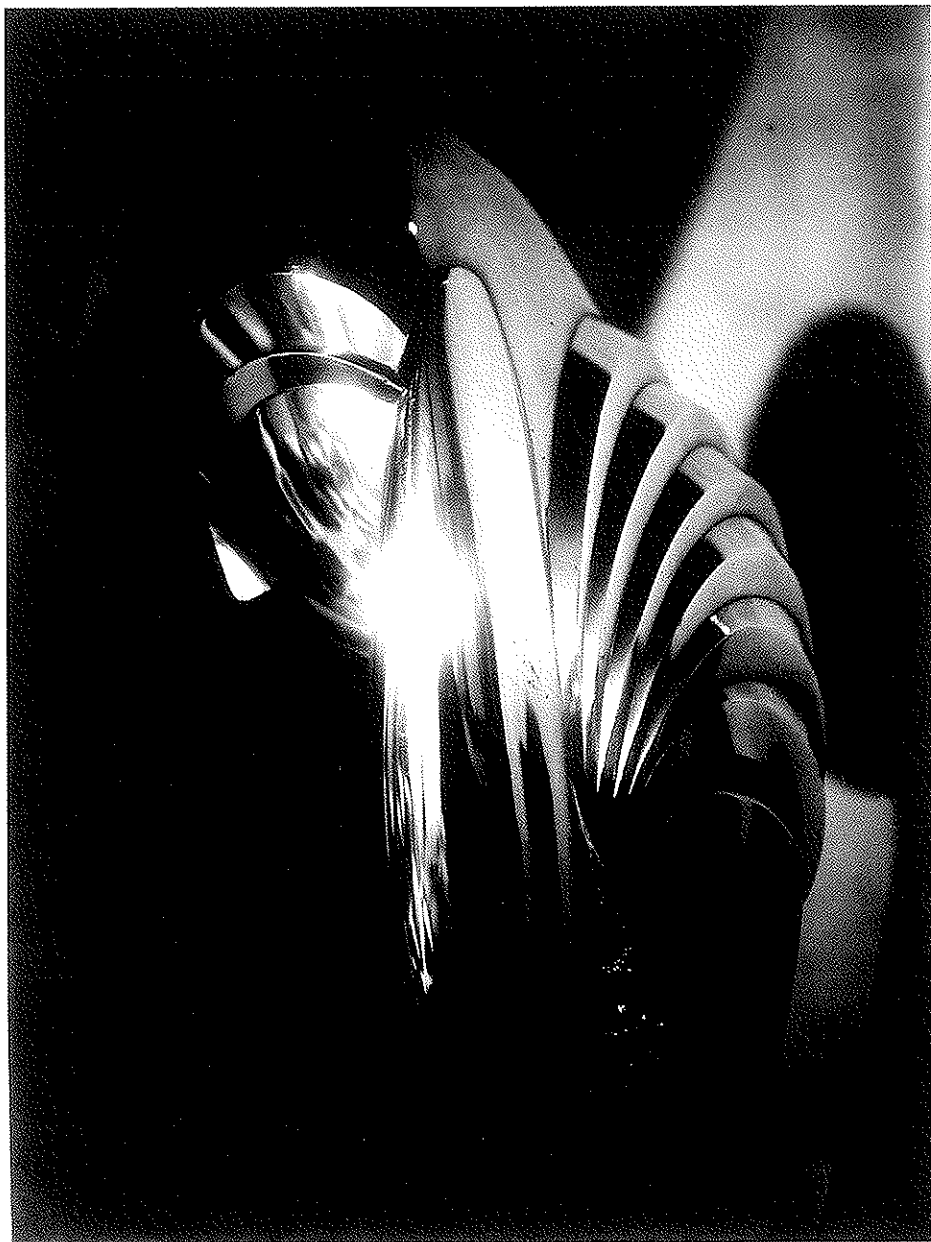
37. *Ibid.*, p. 312.



Constantin Brancusi
L'Oiseau dans l'espace (Bird in Space)
1927 Cat. No. 19



Constantin Brancusi
L'Oiseau dans l'espace (Bird in Space)
1927 Cat. No. 20



Constantin Brancusi

Mlle. Pogany II
1920 Cat. No. 14