

## Brancusi as Photographer\*

**A**t the turn of the century other sculptors besides Brancusi had made or used photography. Medardo Rosso, for example, made photographs of his sculpture. And Auguste Rodin (with whom Brancusi briefly studied in 1907) was evidently fascinated by the medium and used it extensively. According to Albert Elsen, Rodin employed a number of photographers as collaborators by contractually retaining control over the lighting and composition of the photographs; thus they were taken according to Rodin's specific viewing of the subject on the ground glass.

Though by 1918 Brancusi had established the principal thrust and themes of his sculpture, and was already a noted and influential artist, he was still hardly more than competent as a photographer. Man Ray's recollection, that Brancusi's renewed surge of interest in the medium around the early twenties was occasioned by his dissatisfaction with the photographs of his work taken by others, may indeed be correct, but seems inadequate to explain the intensity of Brancusi's concern. There must be a more plausible explanation for the large body of photographs left in his studio. Equally difficult to either prove or accept is the suggestion that Brancusi documented the progressive evolution of each stage of his sculpture. Such data appearing in his photographs is probably no more than coincidental, for all photographs are to a greater or lesser degree evidentiary: they record the specific appearance of things or people at a given moment. Whatever the apparent circumstances, a more likely factor is the implicit correspondence and common linkage between sculpture and photography because of each medium's intricate involvement in light, space and temporality.

In contrast to painting, sculpture is a medium crucially affected by light, the palpability, intensity and location of which irradiates sculptural form to reveal and define mass, contour, surface, color, and even mood. The expressive appearance of a sculpture can be radically altered by changes in light. Sculpture is also an ambient art. Light conjoins sculpture to the space in which it is seen. (Different materials, for

\* First published by the Akron Art Institute, 1980.

instance, wood, stone, marble, and bronze will absorb or reflect light according to the way they are worked.) Highly polished bronze will refract and reflect light as well as mirror the viewer and parts of the surrounding ambience. As the viewer moves so does the reflected image. Paintings finish at the edge of the frame; in comparison sculpture is a contextual and temporal medium, and nowhere more so in the first half of the twentieth century than in Brancusi's oeuvre.

The word "documentary" is often used in association with Brancusi's photographs. It should be borne in mind, however, that this word's modern usage derives from film and television, wherein it means to dramatically structure real events to give the impression of an actual event. This sense of the word is applicable to Brancusi's photographs only in that they document his thoughts on sculpture rather than outward appearance of the sculpture.

Paradoxically, though Brancusi had been photographing his work for years, his impulse in the early 1920s to better his photographic vision leads him not toward the photography of his time, but toward the most advanced painting – Synthetic Cubism (nos. 13–17 and 18–25, as well as many others<sup>1</sup>). Though present and carefully depicted, the sculptural objects in many of these photographs appear to be almost irrelevant. In the fusion of mass and void they become props subservient to the structure of the photographs, and thereby subsumed into the overall pictorial surface. Brancusi eschews normal photographic rendition of space for one that is painterly: shallow, impacted, and with any suggestion of a horizon or boundaries completely minimized. The light consciously avoids dramatic highlights and shadows that might detract from the overall unity of surface and form. When Brancusi intensifies the contrasts of light and dark (nos. 18 and 26), the detail of the sculpture is explicitly suppressed in deference to unity of surface; they appear as virtually black bulky shapes, mere compositional elements. The introduction of a Cubist syntax into photography at this date is an astonishing move on Brancusi's part, and utterly at variance with the most advanced photography of the time. By and large, with the sole exception of Paul Outerbridge, no photographers thought to address themselves to visual problems of this nature, either in Europe or America, until at least a decade later.

Though he limits himself to the accoutrements and sculptural objects in his studio (and sometimes adds a personal touch such as flowers or a plant), Brancusi's subjects are not randomly found: he selects, stacks, and carefully composes his material. In the *View of the Studio* (no. 35) another subject, another medium, is introduced, the overlapping pile of canvases (in the upper right corner), as a reminder of a different phase of his artistic endeavor. The sculptures he is working on are thrust forward, the light falls back, and the weight of the photograph is at his feet. The unexpected closeness of the viewer to the objects enforces a sense of drama. The photograph speaks of the past, of things completed, of those set aside for the time being, of actions about to be taken, and of a range of thinking going on. The shape of the circular iron mooring ring attached to the massive mooring post corresponds to the image of the head and shoulders in the topmost, stacked painting, to the marble form on the sacking in the foreground, and to the bronze *Newborn* on the soapbox (to the left). This is a very intentional photograph: Brancusi reveals the origins of various sculptures, the occurrence in nature of the original form (the head) and the variety of materials with which he works. Thus the photograph not only documents his working processes but does so within a Cubist mode; the various objects are impacted within a shallow, frontal space of overlapping planes.

Another sensation and a different drama is evoked by a cluster of images in which *Bird in Space* is the focus of attention (nos. 28–32). Positioned above the piled debris of the studio (and above all other sculptures), *Bird in Space* takes on a supravisibility, as if to say that *this* sculpture, having emerged out of the materials, tools and processes, and out of the life of the maker, embodies a reservoir of memories, efforts, and thoughts about art so potent that they will lead to yet other sculptures to be made out of some future, unknown meditations. Above all, these photographs disclose Brancusi's state of mind. The various objects visible in the photos are only incidental to a much larger view of art.

In two views of *Bird in Space* taken from a high vantage point (nos. 31 and 32) Brancusi photographs downward onto the light. The paired photographs reveal how he changes the weight of light and dark to manipulate the eye of the viewer evenly over the surface. The corner of the studio is so arranged that it appears like a giant, faceted environ-

mental sculpture of raw, cubed stones punctuated and accented by many different sculptures positioned to lead the eye to the far-off *Bird in Space*. The space is painterly and suggests the contrapuntal rhythmic vocabulary of analytic cubism. Both photographs seem to have been taken within a short time of each other. In the second photograph there are slight changes in the light, the crop, the position of some sculptures, and another *Bird in Space* has been added. Because of its dominant position, Brancusi seems to state that *Bird in Space* has come into being as a consequence of a vast amount of activity over many years; and that highly focused and intentional gestures are necessary to make a piece of sculpture. But as a result of those gestures, changes occur in the studio that relate to the idea of sculpture as well as to a specific sculpture. These highly intentional actions may be aimed toward producing a single sculpture; however, they also produce consequential actions that change the appearance of the studio. So the photographs frame not only the piece Brancusi has been working on, they also convey information on how his energy has modified the whole environment, and how the space has been modified by the sculpture.

Brancusi consistently probes the possibilities of photography by changing focus, scale, crop and the intensity of light. The exploration and control of one aspect at a time of these properties permeate clusters of his photographs. It is doubtful, however, if technique is the catalyst to the thought. Rather, he bends photography toward his will. In one series (nos. 42–45) different qualities of light are used to alter the appearance of *Bird in Space*. The photographs progress from direct daylight pouring in through an open window, to light filtered through opaque glass, to artificial light (two lamps), to enhanced artificial light (intensification of exposure). Because there is no intention on Brancusi's part to set up a situation whereby one of a number of alternatives is better than the others, it would be pointless to assert which photograph is better or best. Instead, Brancusi is revealing how he works as an artist: not by carving, or casting, or even photographing (these are merely mechanical or technical operations), but by pursuing a continuously renewing potential. Though different, each photograph is about the same subject matter. And like the 16 variations on the *Bird in Space* that Brancusi was to make over his lifetime, the four photographs signal his interest

in that theater of the mind where a state of unfinishedness and progression can play itself out more dramatically and assertively than in the idea if a single image. Once this point of abstraction is apprehended then it is possible to understand these photographs as documentary in the most complex, expressive and poetic sense of the word.

Brancusi's photographs can be split into two distinctly contrasting modes: 1) those in which the studio is the principal field of activity; and 2) single pieces of sculpture isolated from the environment. In the latter, the background tends toward the neutral, and the treatment of forms veers toward the abstract. In many, beauty of form and light is so concentrated, that the rest of the world seems irrelevant. The theme itself is more glamorous than the rough-and-ready working situation in the studio. These photographs have a distinct tendency toward the glamor portrait of the period, especially in the series consisting of the profile, three-quarter, and frontal views of the marble bust of *Mlle Pogany III* (nos. 68 and 70).

There is little doubt, too, that in many of these photographs Brancusi reveals a knowledge of and is influenced by some of the most advanced photographic thinking of the period, especially in the two photographs of *Leda* (nos. 75 and 76). The circular, polished base of this sculpture was designed by Brancusi to be turned, and the photographs are about this implied kinetic quality. When viewing these photographs it is difficult to conceive of the sculpture as a single heavy object. Shadows and reflections disperse the eye over the surface to diffuse the visual center of attention; the sculpture dissolves into a photographic light abstraction, not unlike the (earlier) Vorticist photographs of Coburn, or the more contemporary images of Brugiere.

At times, Brancusi's desire to mold the viewer's eyes and to enforce his own vision of his sculpture seems almost authoritarian. There seems to be no escape. Yet there is another moment when we look at these photographs and realize that they represent a wonderfully condensed and impacted view of a work of art.

Brancusi often appears in his own photographs, as if to say for a work of art to exist there has to be a maker, an artist imposing his will. Brancusi was a wonderfully intelligent and passionately serious photographer. Unlike any other photographer, he not only pressed the

release and made the total photograph, but he made all that is in the photograph: the environment, the way of life, as well as the art itself.

Note

1. All numbered photographic references in parentheses refer to the French language edition of the Centre Georges Pompidou Brancusi monograph.