

THE SCULPTURAL DIMENSION OF PHOTOGRAPHY (AND VICE VERSA)

BERNARD MARCELIS

This article takes a look at sculptors who have had a close relationship with the medium, either because they practiced it personally or because they exercised strict control over the pictures of their work taken by photographers, often commissioned by them.

It is interesting to note how much the work of a handful of major artists, from Rodin (1840–1917), especially, and Bourdelle (1861–1929) to Didier Vermeiren and Johannes Rödning today, has led to an interpenetration between the two disciplines over the last century. While the complementary relationship between drawing and sculpture seems to have remained unchanged, photography had to struggle before successfully establishing itself as almost an ally. Photography and sculpture have never had the kind of conflictual and competitive relations as there were between photography and painting in the nineteenth century. Obviously that was a different debate in a different context, but this fact is striking all the same.

Especially during its early days, photography seemed like a technology, a mechanical process, external to the creative act. It's fascinating to follow the changes in its relationship with sculpture over the course of the next hundred years. Both disciplines particularly involve light, the question of viewpoint and multiple planes of vision, as Rodin so clearly understood. But this formal relationship is not sufficient to have made sculptors interested in the importance that photography could hold for their work. A notable example of those who did was Boccioni, the Italian Futurist sculptor who died too young, whose enthusiasm for the dissolution of forms and the simultaneity of vision was perhaps one reason for his passion for photography.

How did it happen that photography, which started out as something exterior to the ancient and classical discipline of sculpture and posterior to its making (unlike preparatory sketches and drawings), by the end of the twentieth century was able to help redefine the very concepts of sculpture, public art and intervention in space? How was it that photography, for a handful of artists, was even able to reverse roles, and, consequently, not only change the way we see and apprehend sculpture but also contribute to redefining its status?

SCULPTORS AND THEIR STUDIO

In addition to the particular attention they paid to how their work was reproduced and circulated, if Rodin and Bourdelle can be considered pioneers in the relationship between sculpture and photography, it is also because of their interest in and attention to this new technology for making images. It should be remembered that photography was as much a newly emerging technology in their day as digitization is for artists today. Both of them paid extreme attention to the documentation of their work, seeking to achieve as much control as possible over its distribution and impact. It is no accident in this regard that both wanted to strictly determine and control the angle from which their work was viewed.⁽¹⁾

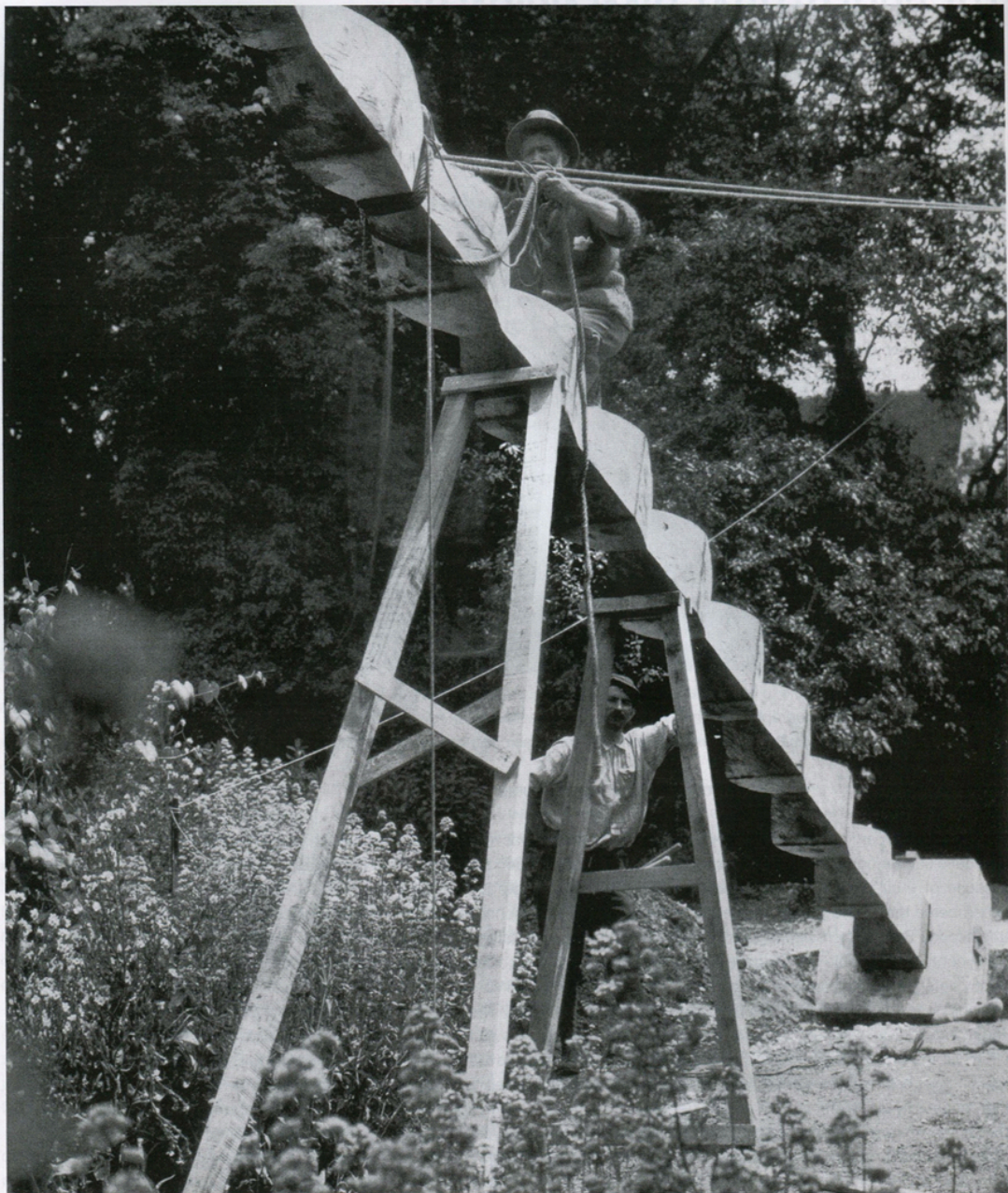
Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) came to photography through Man Ray starting in 1914, and as with Rodin and Bourdelle the subject of these photos was primarily his studio as a space of experimentation. What was important for him, more than any of his colleagues, was how to see each piece, and especially the relationships between the sculptures and with the space around them (i.e. his studio). Each sculpture was shot repeatedly and from various angles depending on the changing light. Similarly, he worked with the photos themselves, juxtaposing positive and negative prints of the same artwork. He also took series of pictures without moving the camera—all that changed was the light on the studio walls behind them. Brancusi's photos brought the research and experimentation dimensions of the studio into plain sight.

When he installed his monumental sculptures outdoors, as he did with the *Endless Column* iterations in Voulangis and Târgu Jiu, he did not abandon photography but rather made it even more documentary by shooting moving footage.⁽²⁾ It was as if the passage to outdoor monumental projects required a new technology, even though he had already experimented with short movie sequences, also studies of his best-known sculptures in his workshop.

(1) Among the photographers Rodin hired to take pictures of his artwork were Jacques-Ernest Bulloz, Eugène Druet, Jean-François Limet and, the most famous among them, Edward Steichen, who contributed to the recognition of photography by artists. (See *Les Photographes de Rodin*, Hélène Binet,

Musée Rodin, 1986.

(2) This has been well brought out recently by the exhibition *Brancusi Film Photographie* at the Pompidou Center (June 29–September 12, 2011) and abundantly documented in the catalogue of the same name (Le Point du Jour,



Constantin Brancusi installant *la Colonne sans fin*, dans le jardin de son ami Edward Steichen, à Voulangis, en 1926. Brancusi installing the "Endless Column" in the garden of his friend, Edward Steichen

Ph. Edward Steichen

Perceptions changed sharply in the late 1960s when some artists altered their practice and left the studio. Obviously they could not pervade a public space—as statuary had always done since antiquity, impacting on minds and cities for commemorative, historical or ideological purposes—just by taking a sculpture conceived in a workshop and putting it outside. What was most interesting was when they left public spaces as usually conceived and set out to explore sites free of any cultural or artistic associations, places relatively difficult to reach and even hard to see, such as deserts, mountains, lakes and so on. Consequently the land art movement played an essential role in changing the scale, relationship and perception of the artwork and especially the way it is documented.

Because all of this is fairly obvious, there has been less emphasis on the fact that all of these artists started out as self-identified sculptors and most remained so even as they began working with entirely different raw materials (Michael Heizer, Richard Long, Nancy Holt and Gordon Matta-Clark). There were also artists whose work was more conceptual or narrative, such as Hamish Fulton, and especially those whose conception of space was much more subtle, like Jan Dibbets. Photography (still or video) was the only way his perspective corrections could be perceived. Dibbets was a video pioneer, as was Smithson, who famous *Spiral Jetty* is the film object par excellence. These approaches, so radical for their times and carried out with an autonomy and economy of means unimaginable today, naturally led these artists to use photography to make visible work that was otherwise inaccessible. While they started out as documentary recordings, such photographs were to become equally autonomous artworks in their own right, especially at a time when this kind of work was rarely shown in a reconfigured form in galleries and museums, as was the case with some later pieces.

In addition to this aspect, relatively obvious for an article on this subject, photography's self-proclaimed invasion of the field of the visual arts also strongly contributed to establishing its legitimacy and recognition as an artistic practice in itself, as would later be seen with Bernd and Hilla Becher, Gilbert & George, and so many others.

FROM ANONYMOUS SCULPTURE TO LIVING SCULPTURES

Was it for similarly paradoxical reasons or simply because it was part of the zeitgeist that concepts such as *Anonyme Skulpturen* (3) and *Living Sculptures* (4) arose at about the same time, in the early 1970s? They were formulated by artists who used photography to make artworks and not just document them. While the Bechers were solely concerned with industrial landscapes and the architectural traces of industry, and Gilbert & George exclusively with self-portraits, at least when they started out, their work converges on several points. First of all, in formal terms, it is elaborated in the form of systems where the isolated image (especially in the case of Gilbert & George) has no existence other than in the context of the broader ensemble it is part of. The particular relationship between their compositions and visual assemblages on the one hand and the wall surface on the other leads the eye to recompose these images. It would be an exaggeration to refer to a "sculptural composition," as if they seemed to stand out from the wall surface, but still we are far from a traditional hanging of photographs.

Their respective work can be considered theatricalized. The first couple staged photos of an almost totemic industrial past, always shot head-on with no disembodied white and black, the second a total and deliberate confusion between art and life, representation and reality.

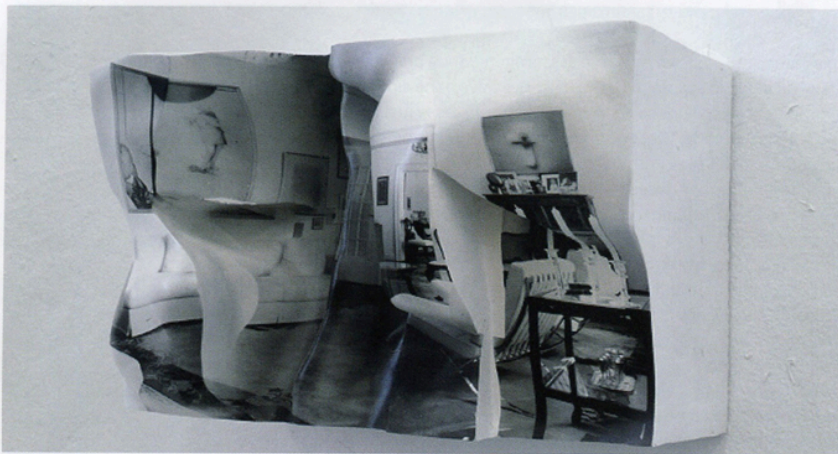
DEFINING THE PERSPECTIVE AND DISSECTING THE LANDSCAPE

Formally quite unlike the artists previously cited but conceptually quite similar, George Rouse, who started out as a painter, maintains a certain ambiguity as he interrogates the relations between photography and sculpture. His use of perspective produces an illusion of two-dimensionality in abandoned industrial sites. Rouse is concerned with the ephemeral. His prints are not a recording of it but its final result. Unlike his previous pieces that were meant to rapidly cease to exist and therefore be inaccessible, recently he has been making temporary constructions in more visible venues, site-specific works meant to last as long as the exhibitions they are part of, which also include photographs of them. Thus this photographer has, in a way, now taken an opposite approach, showing some of his work over a period of time and giving the public access to it. The ideal viewpoint required by the photo is no longer immediately perceptible, especially since the artwork, now inserted into the real world, can be viewed from various angles. Once again we are

Based in Brussels, Bernard Marcelis is a longstanding contributor to art press and, in addition to writing art criticism, works as a curator. He has always been interested in the relations between photography and the visual arts, has published books on André (whose catalogue raisonné he edited), Bernar Venet and Ellen Kooi, and is currently working on a publication about Dominique Gauthier. In 2008 he co-organized several exhibitions around Belgium on French contemporary art and sculpture (France Kunststart.be). In 2010 he was artistic adviser for the HSBC photography prize. He also coordinated the issue of art press 2 (no. 19) on Belgian contemporary art.

(3) Bernhard and Hilla Becher, *Anonyme Skulpturen. Eine Typologie technischer Bauten* [Art — Press Verlag, Düsseldorf, 1970]

(4) Gilbert & George's first performance, entitled *The Singing Sculpture*, took place at the Nigel Greenwood Gallery in London in 1970.



Johannes Döring, *Living Room 2007*. Tirage argentique sur moulage plastique, 40 x 28 x 21 cm. Gelatin-silver print on plaster.
 Court. galerie Greta Meert, Bruxelles

witnessing an inversion of the relationship to the painter or photographer's studio, as if the viewer's gaze also had to be subjected to the test of reality.

In parallel with his other work, Peter Downsbrough, who was essentially a Minimalist sculptor initially, has developed an autonomous practice as a photographer and video maker, basically concentrating on his perception of the urban environment and its main constitutive perspectives. Like his sculptural structures that discreetly impart a rhythm to public spaces and make us see them differently, by means of the same rigorous framing his photos reveal unsuspected points of view whose existence he confirms by plucking them out of the reigning chaos.

FROM THE PEDESTAL TO THE WALL

The sculptor Didier Vermeiren has probably gone further than anyone else in his reflections on photography while practicing it rigorously for thirty years now. Like his celebrated predecessors (whose photos he collects), his subject matter is limited to the two most obvious things, his own work and his studios. Not content with sumptuous prints of his sculptures, their installation and environment, his shows and studio views, he has also produced veritable photographic artworks in two very different series. The variations in the sequence *Profils/Cariatide à la pierre* (1998) comprise superimpositions of profile shots of a single artwork on the same film, generating a sensation of instability. With the series *Photoreliefs* (2005), Vermeiren crossed over into three-dimensional photography. The pictures are mounted on three-dimensional pieces of wood that can be considered pedestals hung on the wall in the same way one would usually exhibit photos. Jutting out from the wall, these "pedestals"—and we all know just how much his work in general is based on this question—once again interrogate, but in a different manner, the same concepts as he did in the past: weightlessness, equilibrium and absence. With this work Vermeiren has made an audacious synthesis between photography and sculpture, a continuation of the research he has always carried out in the two disciplines and the attention he has always devoted to the time and place where the artwork appears.

In comparing Vermeiren's recent work with that of Döring, we can conclude that the circle since Rodin has been closed. His *sculptureimages* are three-dimensional objects directly modeled on photographs. These are not 3D photos but true "sculptures" whose volume is partially determined by the form of the picture. Embodying the image in plaster confers upon it a more pronounced perspective, with open spaces and hollows that mark a strange interval between sculpture and photography. The image may be the origin of the piece, but the final result is a sculpture whose imprint is an image.

This brief overview of the relationships between sculpture and photography cries out for further deepening and development, especially by considering the enormous question of the body of the artist, deliberately passed over in this essay but closely related to its subject. From the Surrealists to Irving Penn, John Coplans, Dieter Appelt, Peter Witkin and Cindy Sherman, these relationships involve going from photography to sculpture rather than the other way around.

Translation, L-S Torgoff