



The Absent Object

JEFFREY WEISS ON ERIN SHIRREFF'S *MEDARDO ROSSO, MADAME X, 1896, 2013*

IN “WHY SCULPTURE IS BORING” (1846), Charles Baudelaire seeks to diagnose the modern condition of the sculptural object. His chief claim, however, concerns the elementary nature of the object across historical time. In contrast to painting, Baudelaire writes, sculpture in the round is plagued by certain crucial “disadvantages.” A painting is “despotic”: In its flat frontality, it demands to be seen from one position alone. Conversely, a work of sculpture, which we are apt to view from many perspectives, cannot control the way in which it is beheld. Despite its identity as an autonomous object in the world, a sculpture, Baudelaire claims, is therefore “elusive.” Contingency of viewing is further heightened by sculpture’s susceptibility to circumstance—to the chance occurrence, say, of a flickering lamp, which may create an unintended impression.

Baudelaire’s formulation of the status of the sculptural object is framed by a variety of sociocultural values that limit its application to later art. Yet it remains a foundational text. In that he identifies sculpture as constitutively susceptible to the physical conditions of beholding in actual space, Baudelaire’s concerns are with both the ontology of the object and the basic terms of looking. Moreover, the implications of his argument remain peculiarly relevant to the technologized conditions of beholding that pervade aesthetic experience within a culture of the electronic image that so often displaces the “actuality” of that experience where objects and object making are concerned.

For Erin Shirreff, sculptural beholding is inseparable from the mediating function of photographic representation. While Shirreff’s tools include techniques from digital imaging, her primary “object” of interest has long been the camera’s role, as recording device, in the sculptural imaginary. One might describe her work, in light of Baudelaire, as being devoted to a staged intensification of the complex circumstances of encounter and memory as they pertain to the unstable identity of the aesthetic object.

Take *Medardo Rosso, Madame X, 1896*, a new video that was on view in Shirreff’s shows at Lisa Cooley in New York and White Cube Bermondsey in London this past spring and summer, respectively. This work addresses Rosso’s sculpture through the distancing effects of photographic—and videographic—representation. Its terms, however, connote a paradox:

that, in the context of sculpture, photography is a medium through which fullness of perceptual apprehension (and, reflexively invoking Walter Benjamin on the autonomy of the aesthetic object, “aura”) can be said to correspond to one’s *diminishing* contact with sculpture’s material presence. Shirreff’s *Medardo Rosso* represents a theory of the object. As such, the indelible impression it leaves is a haunted one.

The video, which runs for twenty-four minutes, is presented as a roughly seven-by-four-foot vertical-format projection against the flat surface of a shallow white box that juts five inches from the wall. It shows a single photograph of Rosso’s sculpture *Madame X*, which was reshot to produce multiple images that were then subjected to the effects of

changing light. Shirreff discovered the photo in the third edition of a book about modern sculpture by the art historian Carola Giedion-Welcker (first published in German in 1937). Rosso is an important yet somewhat obscure figure in the history of sculpture, having produced work around the turn of the century that would come to be identified as a precursor of modernist form. Indeed, *Madame X* is a specifically controversial work of Rosso’s: Because of its extreme reductivism, which was thought to have been impossible before the example of Constantin Brancusi, Giedion-Welcker redated the sculpture, from 1896 to 1913. During the 1910s, Rosso’s work exerted a strong attraction on the Italian Futurists, who extolled his attempts to approximate the tran-

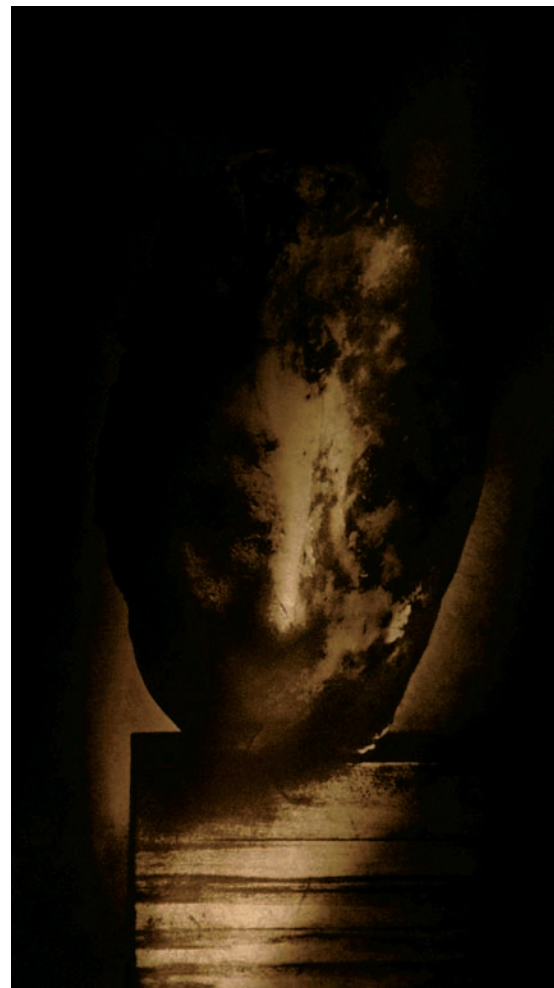
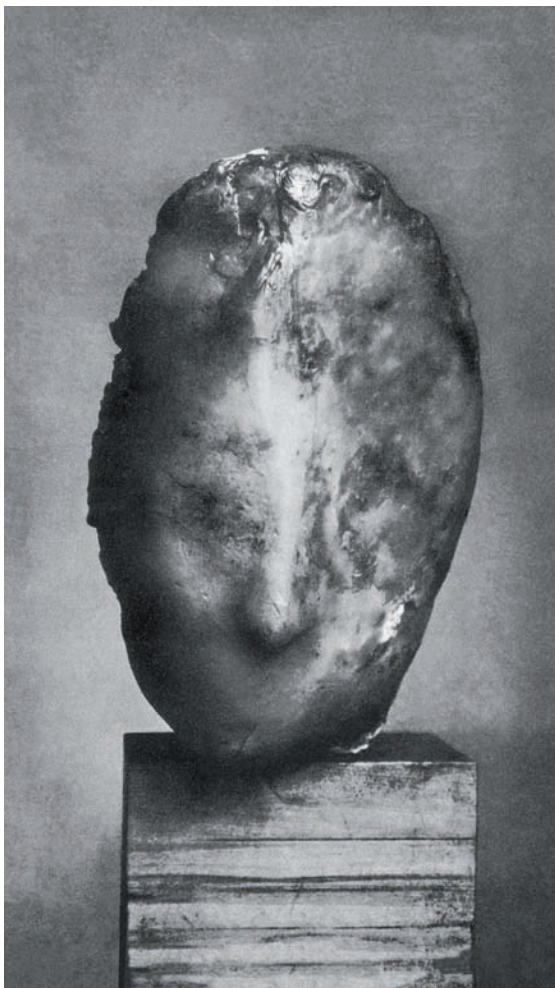


Opposite page: Erin Shirreff, *Medardo Rosso, Madame X, 1896*, 2013, digital video, color, silent, 24 minutes. Installation view.

Left: Medardo Rosso, *Madame X, 1896*, wax, 11 3/4 x 7 1/2 x 9 1/2”.

Below: Exhibition announcement for “Erin Shirreff: Day Is Long,” 2013, Lisa Cooley, New York. Depicted: Source image for *Medardo Rosso, Madame X, 1896, 2013*.





This page and opposite:
Six stills from Erin Shirreff's
Medardo Rosso, Madame X,
1896, 2013, digital video,
color, silent, 24 minutes.

***Medardo Rosso* asks us to remain transfixed. By staying, we allow the work to function, to intensify through light and time our material apprehension of an object that is not there.**

science of optical perception (which led him to develop plastic equivalents for the cloaking effects of darkness, for example, or for the indistinct impression that results from motion or the fleeting glance).

Contingent seeing in Rosso's work was supported not just by reductive form, but also by contingency's apparent opposite: a thickening materiality of means. This included unusual combinations of materials, such as plaster and wax, as well as a strikingly unorthodox approach, in the very late work, to the process of casting in bronze. The casts were allowed to retain, and thereby expose, the conventionally unwanted material residue of the process of their making, such that they became—despite the intrinsic nature of casting as replication—unique objects. Further, a significant aspect of Rosso's practice involved the camera. He can almost be said to have produced sculpture in order to shoot it under multiple conditions of light and display. In this way, he pictorialized the sculptural object, controlling the vantage from which it is seen and thereby heightening its optical effects. Rosso also engaged the photograph itself as an object; through mounting, developing,

and cropping procedures, he used material variability to compromise the dependable mechanical sameness of photographic reproduction.

The photographic image Shirreff has chosen to address is not Rosso's own, but may have been commissioned for Giedion-Welcker's book (in which it is credited to Venezia Ferruzzi). For her video, Shirreff subjected the photo to a process that was labor-intensive, and this process conditions the significance of the final work. An abbreviated account is revealing: The "original" photograph was scanned and then reformatted to fit the 16:9 aspect ratio of high-definition video. This new, cropped image was then printed on four types of paper with different finishes, from matte to glossy, as well as on translucent film; the original was enlarged in this process in order to achieve greater detail. The four prints were then digitally reshot hundreds of times while being subjected to hits of light from various sources. (The translucent-film image was mounted on glass so that it could be both spotlighted and backlit for this purpose, too). Finally, 132 of the resulting 878 images were selected and reformatted, and then, with editing



software, “cross-faded” into one another. In the resulting video, *Madame X* is exposed to what looks like a continuous ebb and flow of illumination; our vantage on the object is fixed while changing light serves to index the movement of elapsing time. Shirreff means to produce an illusionistic space within the frame, so that at first we believe we are seeing light model the object itself. As we watch, it is repeatedly made clear that the light is revealing the textural surface detail of a flat image instead.

Shirreff’s moves are not technically complex, and she deliberately emphasizes material means over digital ones (printed images and actual, rather than virtual, effects of light). Taken together, the very procedures of producing the video can be said to enact a shifting proximity of encounter. In its elusive sculptural form, Rosso’s *Madame X* is a *representation* of contingent optical experience, even as the object is also susceptible to its own optical contingency—the “deficiency” of sculpture as identified by Baudelaire. Yet in Shirreff’s video, the photograph itself is subject to circumstance, to variation through reprinting and to the distortions of light. The size of the projection

creates a larger-than-life impression that commands the gallery space (the experience would be quite different were the image contained by a monitor). As we watch the image of the object move through time, the sculpture’s very topography appears to change. At times its appearance is almost obliterated. Indecipherability is induced by both darkness and light: Veiled in one sequence, the head flares up in the next, where it is glaringly overlit and thereby consumed, as by fire. Further along, low light from a new direction lends the sculpture the form of a death’s-head. It is startling to grasp that a shifting sensation of the identity of the object can derive from the simple manipulation of an image of it.

Shirreff’s video is also a contingent object: Within the space of the gallery, it, too, is framed by circumstances. Indeed, in that it is time-based, our experience of the work is influenced by the point at which we enter and exit the room. This is often true of video, of course: Few are the installations of long-form video that most spectators stay and watch from beginning to end. Nonetheless, *Medardo Rosso* seems to solicit extended viewing: It asks us to remain

transfixed. By staying, we allow it to function, to intensify through light and time our material apprehension of an object that is not there. It is in this way that the work indirectly reflects on the status of the aesthetic object in a post-Conceptualist age of virtual representation, simulacra, and commercial manufacture, as well as on the periodic resurgence of medium specificity and craft. That is, according to the ethic of her work, mediation for Shirreff is less a device than an acknowledged condition—a cultural given. Processed and reprocessed, the photograph in *Medardo Rosso* is many times removed from both the early image and the crafted object it depicts. The mechanical image possesses its own ontology: The camera permits the object, in the form of a trace, to be held. Contingency and material substance are simultaneously acknowledged. Once the video comes to an end, the spell is broken and the sensation undone. What remains is distance, a metonymy of loss. □

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