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Erin Shirreff, still from *Roden Crater*, 2009,
color, silent digital video loop, 14:34 (artwork
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Jenkins & Co., New York)

The photo is an alternative subject, another layer that creates distance. And distance creates an opportunity to view the work more slowly and to explore your relationship to it. I treat the photograph as an object, an object to scan.

—Vija Celmins

How is a photograph a surface for sculpture—a skin that shifts, occludes, or even constitutes sculptural matter, shaping our experience of an object? This is the

Sarah Hamill

Surface Matters: Erin Shirreff's Videos and the Photography of Sculpture

central question that animates the videos of Erin Shirreff, a sculptor who is part of a larger group of artists who have mined photography's mediation of objects and sites in recent years. The burgeoning list includes Thomas Demand, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Rachel Harrison, Gabriel Orozco, Hirsch Perlman, and Paul Sietsema. The durational qualities of Shirreff's video, however, set her works apart—they metaphorize an expansive process of sculptural viewing in a succession of frames. In her silent, looped videos, the unmoving camera is often trained on a single photograph. The stillness of the vantage point gives way to movement the artist fabricates by hand on the surface of the image. Changes in lighting, almost imperceptible, stage a temporal experience of looking. These hybrid works, which move among video, photography, and sculpture, take place at the juncture of a new phase in the history of mass reproduction. They raise questions about what a sculpture is, and how it should be encountered in this age of digital dissemination: How does a sculpture signify in this new world? Can it still lay claim to a temporal and spatially elusive encounter against the backdrop of digital platforms of image capture, aggregation, and exchange, and widespread, instantaneous forms of mediation?

Take, for a start, Shirreff's *Roden Crater* (2009), which centers on a 2007 photograph published on Flickr, by an unknown photographer, of James Turrell's ongoing earthwork at that site in Arizona.¹ Turrell began constructing the monument in 1979, with support from the Dia Art Foundation, in Arizona's Painted Desert northeast of Flagstaff. His aim is to create an observatory six hundred feet in height nested in an extinct cinder cone volcano. When it is complete, visitors will be able to spend the night and experience some twenty observation spaces, to encounter firsthand—without the intervention of technology and miles from the nearest suburban sprawl—celestial events and occurrences. One room will entail enclosures that frame astronomical alignments, the pattern of the moon's orbit, and the movement of the earth's rotation. Another space is conceived as a camera obscura that projects the night sky onto the floor of the room. Still another room contains an aperture that frames the North Star, and viewers seated in a particular spot will be able to glimpse the “gradual shift in the . . . star due to the wobble of the earth's axis,” as Turrell described it.² In *Roden Crater*, time is experienced at the pace of an orbit.

The photograph Shirreff selected from the results of her Google Images search is a panoramic shot likely taken with a wide-angle lens on transparent film.³ Sagebrush and other high-desert plants fill the foreground, while lines of darkly colored volcanic rock stretch laterally across the extinct crater, silhouetted against the large expanse of sky. The photograph structures a pictorial space that draws on conventions of landscape photography; viewers are invited to project

The epigraph is from Vija Celmins, “Interview with Chuck Close,” in *Vija Celmins*, ed. Lane Relyea (New York: Phaidon, 2004), 125.

1. See “Roden Crater,” at www.flickr.com/photos/32656896@N04/3047960289, as of October 2, 2015.

2. Turrell quoted in *James Turrell: The Other Horizon*, ed. Peter Noever, exh. cat. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2001), 169.

3. “Roden Crater.”



Erin Shirreff, two stills from *Roden Crater*, 2009, color, silent digital video loop, 14:34 (artwork © Erin Shirreff; photographs provided by Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York)

4. Erin Shirreff, email to the author, June 16, 2014.

5. Shirreff describes this as “snapshot scale.” Erin Shirreff, “Mediated Objects: Jenifer Papararo in Conversation with Erin Shirreff,” in *Erin Shirreff*, ed. Jan Allen, Sandra Dyck, and Papararo, exh. cat. (Ottawa: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2012), 67.

6. I borrow this distinction from the discussion of Robert Smithson’s photographs of photographs in David Green, “An Image of an Image”: Photography and Robert Morris’s *Continuous Project Altered Daily*,” in *Time and Photography*, ed. Jan Baetens, Alexander Streitberger, and Hilde van Gelder (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), 171.

7. *Ibid.*

8. As André Bazin wrote of the medium of film, it “makes a molding of the object as it exists in time, and furthermore, makes an imprint of the duration of the object.” Bazin, “Theater and Cinema—Part Two,” *What Is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 97.

9. In 1971 Smithson wrote, “There is something abominable about cameras, because they possess the power to invent many worlds. . . . What we believed to be most solid and tangible becomes in the process slides and prints.” Robert Smithson, “Art through the Camera’s Eye,” (1971), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 371.

themselves into this resonant environment, which is devoid of human or industrial life. The distanced, ordered point of view stabilizes the earthwork in an easily digestible image of a work that few will see in person since the site is still closed to visitors. The photograph compresses the site’s temporal expansiveness into an instantaneous, unchanging image.

To make her silent, fourteen-and-a-half minute looped video, Shirreff cropped the photograph, centering the crater in the frame. She printed the photograph in full color on an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch sheet of semi-matte photo paper and made two additional copies of it using the Xerox printer’s sepia tone and black-and-white functions, then positioned the images on the wall of her studio as she manipulated lights while taking 374 stills, which she edited down to 145.⁴ The resulting video reconstructs—reimagines, even—a sculptural experience of temporal indeterminacy, a process of viewing in which changes are by turns subtle and dramatic. At one moment, the space begins to brighten, as if it were a time-lapse recording cataloguing the sun. Light suddenly bleaches the landscape, dissolving it into a post-apocalyptic scene. Soon other movements are detectible: a sepia-tone brightness varnishing the landscape, white, cloudlike shapes that eerily illuminate the crater, and a red spotlight, simulating dawn. Later, a bright flash of light spreads over the image in bumpy fits and starts, calling attention to the surface texture and scale of the photo paper, pulling us back from the illusion of the monumental scene to the handheld qualities of the image.⁵ Not a transparent pane we see through, the photograph is now something to be looked at, with a material density and a scale of its own.⁶

These simulated effects slow down the process of looking, forcing us to become aware of a passage of time at the crater. The video sheds light on the situational space of the sculpture—as if to animate its presentness, its continuous



In 1972 Andre wrote: "I hate photography; I hate photographs; I hate to take photographs; I hate to be photographed; I hate my works to be photographed. I think it's an atrocity that the photograph or reproduction of a work of art has replaced the work of art in the contemplation of art students and so forth." Carl Andre, "Against Photography" (1972), in *Cuts: Texts 1959–2004*, ed. James Meyer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 180.

10. Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space" (1978), rep. *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 201. For discussions of the photographic mediation of earthworks, see also Darsie Alexander, "Reluctant Witness: Photography and Documentation of 1960s and 1970s Art," in *Work Ethic*, ed. Helen Molesworth, exh. cat. (Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003), 53–64; Green, 165–83; Tom Holert, "Land Art's Multiple Sites," in *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, ed. Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, London: Prestel, and Munich: Haus der Kunst, 2013), 97–117; Jane McFadden, "Toward Site," *Grey Room 27* (Spring 2007): 36–57; D. N. Rodowick, "A Virtual Presence in Space," in *Photography and Sculpture: The Art Object in Reproduction*, ed. Sarah Hamill and Megan R. Luke (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2017); and Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960–*

existence in the here and now—apart from its static presentation in a fixed and retroactive image. The sequenced lighting effects fictionalize an inhabited encounter with the site. But they also call attention to the mediating surface of the reproductive image, itself made material.⁷ In the video, the photograph is both invisible as a mechanical copy we see through to grasp a sculpture sealed in time, and a physical surface whose contingent shifts are experienced in duration.⁸ It is both an illusory picture and an obdurate, self-reflective surface that skews our encounter with the site.

That a reproductive photograph could be a surface to conjure a temporally complex encounter with sculpture is somewhat surprising, and, by focusing on a monumental work of Land art, Shirreff's video returns us to a moment of sculptural production in which artists were particularly hostile to the camera's mediation. In his 1978 essay "The Present Tense of Space," Robert Morris voiced a widespread disdain toward photographing sculpture, echoing statements made by the sculptors Robert Smithson, Carl Andre, and others.⁹ He argued that process-oriented and earthworks sculpture of the 1970s take "a position absolutely opposed to the meaning of photography," even as, paradoxically, those projects also relied on the camera to document what were temporary constructions, performances, or remote sites.¹⁰ Conceptualist sculptors approached the camera as a device of straightforward depiction, playing up the seemingly transparent, non-pictorial qualities of the medium.¹¹ For Morris, such transparency was precisely the problem, since photography, he wrote, "shifts an entire cultural perception away from the reality of time in art that is located in space."¹² A photograph re-scaled a sprawling, complex site into a miniature frame, "trivializing" a kinaesthetic experience that takes place in the continuous present—in which, he wrote, "location and point of view are constantly shifting at the apex of time's flow."¹³

What was more, in a photograph, sculptural time was always “retrospective” and incomplete, not in the moment.¹⁴

Morris’s 1978 discussion of a phenomenal sculptural time owes a lot to Rosalind Krauss’s landmark 1977 book *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, in which meaning in a work like Auguste Rodin’s 1877 *Study for the Walking Man*, for instance, rests entirely on its surface effects, or how its outsides are unhinged from its insides.¹⁵ The exterior skin is a messy record of a sculpture’s labored making: unplugged holes, unfiled ridges and joints, knife streaks, and gouges in the clay. For Krauss, the sculpture’s densely worked-over surface stops us from seeing through its skin to construe an a priori body inside: the marks call attention to the experiential process of looking in real time, or what Anne M. Wagner has called sculpture’s “nowness.”¹⁶ A photograph’s fixity—its securing of sculpture from a single point of view and in an instant—annuls this kind of literal instability of surface by positioning the experience of sculpture in the past tense, the “already seen and already known.”¹⁷ At stake was nothing less than the perception of space in time.¹⁸

In *Roden Crater*, Sherriff undoes the terms of Morris’s argument, about photography’s seizing of sculpture’s literalism—its compression of sculptural time in a stationary image. Her video metaphorizes a temporal process of viewing in the round without ever shifting the camera’s vantage point. Using the effects of duration, the camera envisions a spatial—and present—process of perceiving sculpture by materializing the photographic surface. Like the viscous, cluttered surfaces of Rodin’s sculpture, the reproductive image in her video becomes, through the unfolding of frames, a densely laden surface of process—it contains markers of accident, of an experiential time, even as it is also a reproductive image that encases or “embalms” a sculpture.¹⁹ A photographic reproduction, by these lights, is not a lifeless image, as Morris would have it, but a dynamic, material surface that is perceived in duration and subject to time.

In recent years, the photography of sculpture has become an urgent concern for contemporary artists who test photography’s promise of objectivity by taking aim at the reproductive image.²⁰ Some have used the camera’s frame to conjure sculpture from everyday, temporary assemblages, as have Fischli and Weiss, Perlman, and Harrison, to name only a few of a larger group. In this mode, sculptural assemblages are presented for the camera and subsequently destroyed, leaving behind only the photograph, a picture of an ephemeral materiality or a transient object. Others have begun with reproductions, whether a mass-media photograph that is built as a life-size model and then photographed, as in Demand’s large-scale photographs, or an image that is reconstituted on a massive scale using a panoply of everyday materials, such as dust, chocolate, or trash, as in some of Vik Muniz’s photographs. Still others, such as Orozco and Sietsema, explore how the camera can enliven sculptural materiality or space, so that the two media seamlessly entwine. As Orozco has described his interest in such hybrid work, “The point is to make something present, which, inevitably, can only be seen through the photograph.”²¹ For Orozco, a sculptural event and the camera go hand in hand.

These projects are diverse, as are the visual encounters they solicit. Yet they share a questioning of photography’s mediation of sculpture—how a photograph directs our access to material things and shapes our perception of matter and space. Not straightforward records of sculptures or installations, these projects instead call attention to a hybrid interchange of mediums, insisting on an

1982, ed. Douglas Fogle, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 32–34.

11. See Alexander, 60–61.

12. Morris, 182.

13. *Ibid.*, 178.

14. Morris quoted in Green, 168.

15. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 29–30.

16. Anne Wagner, “Sculpture’s Present, Photography’s Past,” in *Photography and Sculpture*, 273. Wagner is referring to Briony Fer’s discussion of the photography of sculpture in Fer, “The Space of Anxiety: Sculpture and Photography in the Work of Jeff Wall,” in *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension*, ed. Geraldine A. Johnson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239.

17. *Ibid.*, 273.

18. Robert Morris, quoting Susan Sontag, quipped that the camera “convert[s] every visible aspect of the world into a static, consumable image.” Morris, 202. Morris was referencing Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” in *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 8–9.

19. André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *What Is Cinema?*, 14.

20. For accounts of this recent turn, see, for instance, Roxana Marcoci, “The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today,” in *The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today*, ed. Marcoci, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 12–20; Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Cosmic Reifications: Gabriel Orozco’s Photographs,” in *Gabriel Orozco*, ed. Yve-Alain Bois (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 139–57; Hal Foster, “Camera Imaginaria,” in *James Casebere: Works 1975–2010*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, exh. cat. (Bologna: Damiani, 2011), 9–16; Anna Dezeuze and Julia Kelly, eds., *Found Sculpture and Photography from Surrealism to Contemporary Art* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2013); and Claire Barliant, “Photography and the Objet Manqué,” *Art in America* 100 (March 2012): 108–17.

21. Orozco quoted in Briony Fer, “Crazy about Saturn: Gabriel Orozco Interviewed by Briony Fer,” in *Gabriel Orozco*, exh. cat. (Mexico City: Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, 2006), 57.

expanded media practice as a comment on sculptural beholding. In her 1999 book *Voyage on the North Sea*, Krauss staged a rejoinder to a shift in contemporary art that she termed the “post-medium condition.” She proposed critical artistic strategies of “differential specificity”—works that in their rearticulation or “re-invention” of a single medium oppose artistic modes of hybridity, such as installation, that are, she claimed, “complicit with a globalization of the image in the service of capital.”²² In 2005 George Baker took a different approach by returning to Krauss’s 1979 framework of the “expanded field” to map a range of contemporary photographic practices that spill over the boundaries of media. Baker argued for a critical model that analyzed the coordinates of intermedial projects:

Given these potential expansions, we need now to resist the lure of the traditional object and medium in contemporary art, just as much as we need to work against the blindness and amnesia folded into our present, so-called post-medium condition. As Fredric Jameson suggested at an earlier fork in the development of postmodernity, what we need in the contemporary moment are maps: we should not retreat from the expanded field of contemporary photographic practice, rather we should map its possibilities, but also deconstruct its potential closure and further open its multiple logics.²³

Baker’s concept of photography’s expanded fields resists ideas of pluralism to instead describe its spatial, narrative, or filmic modes.

By exploring recent projects like Shirreff’s that dwell on the interstices of photography and sculpture, my aim is not to return to traditional discourses of medium-specificity long since decentered. Nor is it to celebrate the post-medium condition of postmodernism, which champions hybridity at the risk of erasing difference and history, the stakes of such a practice, as Baker has outlined them. Rather, I examine how Shirreff’s videos grab hold of a technological apparatus of mediation and use it to explore new aesthetic possibilities for perceiving sculpture in the internet age. Shirreff suggests that sculpture cannot escape photography’s mediation—and what is more, it shouldn’t have to. Her work, which uses video to enliven and metaphorize a temporal encounter with sculpture and photography, operates as both an aesthetic mode of picturing and a recognition of mass forms of technological mediation. Her videos highlight and defamiliarize the role mass media plays in contemporary ideas about sculpture, showing how a technologically produced image can also elicit a temporally elusive and haptic experience with objects. Tamara Trodd has recently described contemporary modes of hybridity as structuring such a dialectical form of aesthetic experience: “This is not a form of the aesthetic that enables the artwork to escape the wider social and industrial structures of the society that surrounds it. Rather, it reads within and on the site of those structures in a way that it is important for us to recover and remember today.”²⁴

For Shirreff, this intermedial sculptural aesthetic mandates a broad historical lens. By focusing her videos on the documentation of earthworks, or on modern sculptors who photographed their objects, the artist sheds light on a long history of mass reproduction in modernity, and emphasizes the different sites of reproductive images, in digital and analog forms, on the web or in a book. In her 2013 *Medardo Rosso, Madame X*, 1896, a twenty-four minute, looped, silent video that is trained on a photographic reproduction of Rosso’s wax sculpture *Madame X* (1896), Shirreff plunges us into the world of a modern sculptor who was among

22. Rosalind Krauss “A Voyage on the North Sea”: *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 56. See also Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 289–305, and *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). For recent discussions of the post-medium condition, see Irene V. Small, “Medium Aspecificity/Autopoietic Form,” in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, ed. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 117–25. Tamara Trodd has described Thomas Demand’s works as hybrids of painting, photography, and sculpture. The photographs, she writes, absorb the sculptural surface, resulting in “a postmedium condition, within which the picture spreads out like ivy, over and within bodies of painting and sculpture which are remaindered as part-objects and part-spaces in the resuscitated photograph-fetish.” Trodd, “Thomas Demand, Jeff Wall, and Sherrie Levine,” *Art History* 32 no. 5 (December 2009): 954–76. This reading is tempting, since it describes how Demand’s photographs are preoccupied with surface, “swallow[ing] up” the sculptural. But it ultimately eludes the tactility of Demand’s photographs and how the facticity of paper does not disappear. Even if the sculptural is downplayed in the photographs, it is not forgotten: Demand’s images still hold onto the physical materiality of objects, as a piercing counterpoint to Plexiglas. It’s the tension between the separate surfaces of sculptural construction and photographic image that sets the work in motion.

23. George Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” *October* 114 (Fall 2005): 138. See also Baker, “The Black Mirror,” *October* 158 (Fall 2016): 30–66.

24. Tamara Trodd, *The Art of Mechanical Reproduction: Technology and Aesthetics from Duchamp to the Digital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 178.

25. Auguste Rodin, his friend and rival, directed a coterie of photographers whom he contracted to document his work. See Kirk Varnedoe, "Rodin and Photography," in *Rodin Rediscovered*, ed. Albert Elsen (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1981), 203–47.

26. According to Danila Marsure Rosso, Rosso produced postcards as gallery publicity for his exhibitions in Venice in 1914 and Rome in the 1920s. Danila Marsure Rosso, interview with the author, May 2013. Rosso's copies of the postcards are housed in the Archivio Medardo Rosso, Milan. Rosso's photographs were published during his lifetime in Julius Meier-Graefe, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der Modernen Kunst* (Stuttgart: Julius Hoffmann, 1904); "Le Sculpture de Lumière: Un Précurseur: Medardo Rosso" *Comoedia* no. 1920 (January 3, 1913): 1; and Nino Barbantini, *Medardo Rosso* (Milan: Bottega di Poesia, 1923), among other venues. Rosso also exhibited his photographs alongside his sculptures, testament to the value he placed in them as independent images. See Sharon Hecker, "Reflection and Repetition in Rosso's Art," in *Medardo Rosso: Second Impressions*, ed. Harry Cooper and Hecker, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 65–67.

27. Medardo Rosso, letter to Carla Carrà, November 1926, in *Medardo Rosso*, ed. Gloria Moore, trans. Mauri K. Fitzgibbon, Ann King, José Manuel López, and Richard Rees, exh. cat. (Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, and Barcelona: Polígrafa, 1997), 299, translation modified.

28. The photograph is credited to Venezia Ferruzzi, possibly a Venetian photographic firm. The sculpture was erroneously dated to 1913 by Mino Borghi in his 1950 book *Medardo Rosso*, a date that Carola Giedion-Welcker repeated in her 1955 publication *Contemporary Sculpture*. The later date suited Giedion-Welcker's argument that *Madame X* drew from Constantin Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* (1910). See Paola Mola, *Rosso: The Transient Form* (Milan: Skira, 2007), 96. Shirreff corrected the sculpture's date to 1896 in the title of her video. For a rich discussion of Shirreff's approach to Rosso, see Jeffrey Weiss, "The Absent Object: Jeffrey Weiss on Erin Shirreff's *Medardo Rosso, Madame X, 1896, 2013*," *Artforum* 52, no. 2 (October 2013): 255–57.

29. In addition to printing the photographs on seventeen-by-eleven-inch sheets of paper with matte, pearl, and glossy finishes, Shirreff also took photographs of the illustration retoned in different colors. She hung the images on foam-core boards or translucent film. Erin Shirreff, email to the author, June 16, 2014.

30. Shirreff, "Mediated Objects, Jenifer Pappararo in Conversation with Erin Shirreff," 67.

31. See Hecker, 62; and Mola, "The Transient Form," in *Rosso: The Transient Form*, 17–28.

the first to photograph his work, recouping a history of sculpture's analog hybrid forms for the digital age. Shirreff selected a photograph of *Madame X* taken by a stock photographer, not Rosso himself, but her video reenacts the photographic surfaces that Rosso brought to his own sculpture, asking us to see them anew through her own crafted mediations.²⁵ Beginning in the 1880s, Rosso published his photographs as postcards announcing his exhibitions, and his images appeared as illustrations in catalogues, newspapers, and journals.²⁶ The sculptor was adamant that his own photographs—unaltered, unretouched—be used in publication, writing in 1926, "I want those [by me] and no others."²⁷

The video centers on a photograph Shirreff found in Carola Giedion-Welcker's 1955 survey of modern sculpture, *Contemporary Sculpture: An Evolution in Volume and Space*, which Shirreff digitally scanned and cropped to a high-definition format.²⁸ She printed the reformatted image on different papers and translucent film, and set to work rephotographing these images, hanging them in her studio. Shirreff took 878 photographs while submitting the printed images to different lighting effects: the focused illumination of a light, clamp lights positioned in front of or behind the image, and gels suspended over the lights or the camera.²⁹ Back at her computer, she condensed and edited the stills into a digital video, creating transitions between 132 shots. But the analog effects from the studio remained, imparting a "handmade" aesthetic, as she has described it.³⁰

In the course of the video, Rosso's sculpture and its textured surface subtly shift and change. A soft light falls from above, heightening the sculpture's textured marks and drawing attention to the flaking surface of the cheek. A glowing burst of light silhouettes the uneven contours of its left-most edge, and a spotlight blocks the head. The video illuminates and darkens the sculpture's material make-up—in the course of the video, it becomes a ghostly presence and a dissolving specter, a flattened contour and a densely present object. At key moments in this metamorphosis, however, light catches the surface of the image, causing viewers to realize that what they are looking at is not a sculpture at all, but rather its photographic representation, itself made material. In the video, we are drawn into the photograph's special illusionism—made to see its designation of a vantage point and frame—and confront it as an object through handmade effects that unsettle its powers of depiction, or the illusion that a reproduction is a one-to-one copy. Like the sculpture's contingent skin, the photograph is a shifting plane, experienced in duration, and in the video we move between temporal frameworks: we are both here and elsewhere, tracking the present succession of frames and inhabiting the projected and timeless space of the image.

Shirreff destabilizes both the sculpture and its reproductive photograph, a process of unsettling that Rosso himself amplified in his practice. As Sharon Hecker and Paola Mola have separately observed, the artist's use of photographic reproduction follows his employment of casting in his sculptural practice: both mechanisms of copying ultimately produced wholly new works, shifting expectations for stability, originality, and permanence.³¹ Rosso radically rejected established conventions of photographic neutrality—or the sort of image that was published in Giedion-Welcker's book, which employed the tropes of soft, even lighting, plain backgrounds, and frontal vantage points.³² He positioned his camera close to the sculpture and cropped his photographs by hand and unevenly. He experimented with the developing process by adding metal or sepia pigments



Erin Shirreff, three stills from *Medardo Rosso, Madame X, 1896, 2013*, color, silent digital video loop, 24 min. (artwork © Erin Shirreff; photographs provided by Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York)

that retuned his images, or by leaving visible the marks of the darkroom instruments. Rosso also rephotographed his photographs, magnifying or blurring them, often adding to their surfaces scratches, gouges, ink, and paint.

Consider, for instance, two of the nine photographs the sculptor made of *Madame X*; both were rephotographed from a single image. In one, he blanketed the background with white spray paint, obscuring it in a luminous ground of haze that draws attention to the photographic surface. Positioned at the lower right edge and seen from an oblique vantage point, the sculpture presses beyond the frame. Rosso imagines the work as a cipher or fragment. A second photograph obliterates the sculpture's edges through cropping. Without boundaries to identify the sculpture's shape, *Madame X* appears more like a pictorial image than an obdurate thing.³³ In a later photograph, which Rosso rephotographed and retuned from an enlarged detail, the sculptor tore the image's surface on the lower left, heightening its flatness.

These sundry photographs—only two of an even more heterogeneous group—destabilize *Madame X*: they claim no single image in which the object appears. The sculpture is many different things, seen in different situations—as Wagner writes, “neither static object nor evanescent illusion, sculpture is and has always been both.”³⁴ Sculpture here is subject to the photographic lens, reliant on—and animated through—its procedures of reproduction, which are laid bare in Rosso's erratic cuts and torn surfaces. These handmade interventions underscore all the more the artificial and contingent mechanisms of reproduction, or how it carries a material density of its own. Rosso shatters the illusion of the fixed photographic copy—he tears it apart with his gouges into the photographic surface.

32. For a discussion of these conventions, see, for instance, Joel Snyder, “Nineteenth-Century Photography of Sculpture and the Rhetoric of Substitution,” in *Sculpture and Photography Envisioning the Third Dimension*, ed. Geraldine Johnson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21–34.

33. As Harry Cooper has argued, Rosso's photographs activate a site of beholding. Cooper, “Ecce Rosso!” in *Medardo Rosso*, 10.

34. Wagner, 274.



Medardo Rosso, photograph of Madame X, ca. 1911, gelatin silver bromide print, photograph of a ca. 1900 photograph, enlarged, with spray paint, cropped by hand, 11¼ x 6¾ in. (28.7 x 17.3 cm). Private collection (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Archivio Medardo Rosso, Milan)

Medardo Rosso, photograph of Madame X, ca. 1911, aristotype, photograph of a ca. 1900 photograph, enlarged, blocked by spray paint, cropped by hand on three sides. Private collection (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Archivio Medardo Rosso, Milan)

35. In 2010, Shirreff noted that she “want[ed] the images in the recent videos . . . to have a physical dimension too. I use HD for these videos because the clarity afforded by that format reveals the particular texture of, say, a glossy photograph, which bounces light off its surface in a way that a matte photograph doesn’t.” Erin Shirreff, in Chelsea Beck, “Project Space: In Conversation with Erin Shirreff,” . . . *might be good* 159, December 17, 2010, at www.fluentcollab.org/mbg/index.php/artistspace/index/159, alias of June 15, 2018. As David Green has argued, video and digital processes bring new temporalities. Green, “Marking Time: Photography, Film and Temporalities of the Image,” in *Stillness and Time: Photography and*

In her retrospective glance, Shirreff mines these lessons, updating them for the most recent phase in the history of mass media. In lieu of Rosso’s scissors, paint, and enlarger, tools to vivify the photographic process, Shirreff deploys lights, papers, and filters to produce a decidedly crafted look—one that comes into full view when juxtaposed with the sharpness of high-definition projection. The analog “inconsistencies”—as she has termed them—puncture the seamless clarity of the video, which is both a record of her studio manipulations and a flexible medium that contains fabricated data.³⁵ Moving from page to screen, the video also shuttles between scales, transforming an experience that would be individual and haptic—leafing through the pages of Giedion-Welcker’s book—into one that is communal: the reader becomes a spectator who now experiences the reproductive photograph in an amplified, spatial format.³⁶

If for Rosso, sculpture and photograph were two separate but interrelated media, in Shirreff’s video, sculpture and reproductive photograph interleave in a video that creates a bodily and meditative experience with mass reproductive technologies. *Medardo Rosso, Madame X, 1896* “activat[es] a set of material relations,” to use Giuliana Bruno’s terms when she argues in her examination of surface in contemporary art that materiality in the digital age involves “a refashioning of our sense of space and contact with the environment, as well as a rethreading of our experience of temporality, interiority, and subjectivity.”³⁷ The video refigures a material and temporal engagement with mass media through its surface, slowing down the pace of perception—and it’s an encounter that hinges entirely on the medium of video.³⁸ Both the sculptural object and the reproductive photograph become thinglike in the slow process of looking that the video constructs. They are presented as objects in motion.

By materializing photographs in duration, Shirreff's videos are unlike other projects that spotlight the photograph by rephotographing it. Her works depart from discourses of appropriation in the rephotography of Pictures Generation artists, as well as conceptualist rephotographs of photographs, for instance Smithson's *Photo Markers* of 1968—such attempts, as the critic Max Kozloff argued in 1979, “do not disrupt the [photographic] surface . . . [since] the surfaces tend circumstantially to be the same as their subjects.”³⁹ Glossing this argument, David Green has written that “Photographs of photographs cannot ‘quote.’ . . . They can only reproduce”—they can only show again the illusion of the image.⁴⁰ Shirreff's videos, by contrast, quote: they reframe the photograph as a contingent surface—an object—that exists in time, disrupting its powers of illusion. Shirreff's videos emphasize the material objecthood of the photograph, following other, more recent projects that highlight the analog photograph's material edge—for instance, Harrison's *Views of the Garden* (1999) or Tacita Dean's *Floh* (2001)—or that call attention to photography's material apparatus, as in Zoe Leonard's *Analogue* (1998–2007).⁴¹ Taken together, this broader work explores how, as Jonathan Friday has written, “pictorial representations—like every other material object—travel through time and are therefore subject to inevitable change.”⁴² In Shirreff's videos, mass reproduction—a process that is often mythologized as static and illusory—is shown to have a material and even archival history. Its modes of imaging are historically and institutionally encoded, far from self-evident.

In Shirreff's video *Moon* (2010), as in *Roden Crater*, those histories include the site of the internet archive. *Moon*, a thirty-two minute loop, comprises sixteen photographs of the moon that Shirreff found on Google Images.⁴³ Among them are scientific and amateur reproductions—taken with the aid of telescopes, some using time-lapse techniques—of the near side of the moon, with its dark lava fields, remnants of volcanic activity, and prominent Tycho crater, which appears at the bottom of the moon when seen from the Northern Hemisphere. Shirreff's chosen images also include those taken by astronauts or lunar probes of the moon's crater-filled far side, which is not visible from earth. *Moon* does not distinguish between these different types of photographs—images taken with varying technologies and from diverse locations that dramatically shift the look of the moon's surface. Instead, the photographs are given a homogeneous shape: Shirreff rescaled them so that each moon registers at the same size and is centered in the frame. Once again, she submitted the printed images to manual controls in the studio while photographing the printouts, and edited 1,044 stills into a video of 119 that mimics the waxing and waning of the moon.⁴⁴

In *Moon*, time seems to pass as light simulates the lunar calendar. At one moment, the light blocks the moon altogether, transforming it into a radiant sun. The moon's surface is both heightened through the illusionism of the telescopic photographs, and occluded in those moments when light blocks our view. As in her other videos, light catches the semi-matte photographic paper, pointing up differences in size and scale, between archival photograph and moon. Even as the video presents a seemingly stable image, the moon remains aloof, moving in and out of visibility. So, too, is the photograph: by presenting a range of disparate and incongruous reproductions, Shirreff destabilizes their photographic fixity, pointing up what Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have described as a photographic rhetoric of objectivity that emerged in the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Like Rosso's

the *Moving Image*, ed. Green and Joanna Lowry (Brighton: Photoworks/Photoforum, 2006), 20–21.

36. For a discussion of the aesthetics of projected images, see, for instance, *Screen/Space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art*, ed. Tamara Trodd (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2011); and Malcolm Turvey, Hal Foster, Chrissie Isles, George Baker, Matthew Buckingham, and Anthony McCall, “Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art,” *October* 104 (Spring 2003): 71–96.

37. Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 8.

38. For a discussion of contemporary artists exploring the digital to manipulate photographic time, see Green, “Marking Time”; Louise Hornby, “Stillness and the Anti-Cinematic in the Work of Fiona Tan,” *Grey Room* 41 (Fall 2010): 48–71; and Uriel Orlow, “The Dialectical Image: *La Jetée* and Photography as Cinema,” in *The Cinematic*, ed. David Company (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 177–84.

39. Max Kozloff, “Photos within Photographs” (1979), cited in Green, “‘An Image of an Image,’” 172.

40. Green, “‘An Image of an Image,’” 172.

41. See, for instance, Svetlana Alpers, “Zoe Leonard—*Analogue*,” in *Zoe Leonard: Photographs*, ed. Urs Stahel, exh. cat. (Zürich: Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2007), 219–23; Mark Godfrey, “Photography Found and Lost: On Tacita Dean's *Floh*,” *October* 114 (Fall 2005): 90–199; and Margaret Iversen, “*Analogue*: On Zoe Leonard and Tacita Dean,” *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 796–818.

42. Jonathan Friday, “Stillness Becoming: Reflections on Bazin, Barthes. and Photographic Stillness,” in *Stillness and Time*, 48

43. Erin Shirreff, email to the author, June 16, 2014.

44. *Ibid.*

45. See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, “Mechanical Objectivity,” in *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 115–90.





Erin Shirreff, two stills from *Moon*, 2010, color, silent digital video loop, 32 min. (artwork © Erin Shirreff; photographs provided by Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York)

Erin Shirreff, screen grab of *Shadow, Glare*, 2010, Mac OS X application (10.5 or later), released in *Triple Canopy* 9, July 9–August 30, 2010 (artwork © Erin Shirreff; photograph provided by Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York)

varied series of photographs of *Madame X*, *Moon* ruptures a positivist model by suggesting that no single reproduction can stand in for the moon.

In *Moon*, finally, Shirreff sheds light on the arbitrariness of the twenty-first-century archive, and the collective storage and dissemination of reproductions on the web. In an interview, the artist noted this archival contingency, saying that the moon “is animated in the video to appear as though it is waxing or waning, but the sequence is artificial and the images derive from a set of photographs of the moon that were taken who knows when.”⁴⁶ Retrieved through a search engine, the moon photographs are severed from their historical or geographic particularity—from their original site. Shirreff marshals these diverse archival images to fictionalize a spatial encounter. In *Moon* these photographs have a fictive material density. By animating their textured surface, the artist repositions them away from the dematerializing effects of the screen.

In his theory of digital art, Mark Hansen argues for an embodied aesthetic of the digital image. Hansen contends that “the digital era and the phenomenon of digitization itself can be understood as demarcating a shift in the correlation of two crucial terms: media and body. Simply put, as media lose their material specificity, the body takes on a more prominent function as a selective processor of information.”⁴⁷ Yet in her videos, Shirreff recovers the materiality of media by stressing the schisms between their surfaces, soliciting an imaginative medial touch. The effect is physical and bodily; as the photograph morphs on the screen, viewers are immersed in the movements between surface and depth, interiority and exteriority, image and object.

Nowhere is this embodiment of surface more apparent than in Shirreff’s 2010 app *Shadow, Glare*, which treats the computer screen as a photographic surface to evoke the beholder’s physical role in the work.⁴⁸ Commissioned by the digital journal *Triple Canopy*, the program is designed to run alongside others—like “a non-stop screen saver on the top-most visual plane of your computer desktop,” as the artist describes it—while it subtly shifts the appearance of the screen, transforming the interface.⁴⁹ As the program runs, one slowly becomes aware of soft angular shadows that emerge, rotate, shift course, lighten, darken, and then

46. Shirreff, “Mediated Objects,” 65.

47. Mark Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 22.

48. Erin Shirreff, “Shadow, Glare,” in *Triple Canopy* 9 (July 9–August 30, 2010), at http://canopycanopy.com/issues/9/contents/shadow_glare, as of June 15, 2018.

49. Shirreff, “Mediated Objects,” 65.



Rachel Harrison, detail of *Voyage of the Beagle*, 2007, fifty-seven pigmented inkjet prints, ea. 18⁷/₁₆ × 13³/₁₆ × 1¹/₁₆ in. (46.9 × 34 × 3 cm), edition of 6 and two artist's proofs (artwork © Rachel Harrison; photograph provided by Greene Naftali Gallery, New York)

disappear on top of the screen's open windows or desktop. Like Shirreff's videos, *Shadow, Glare* manipulates the skin of the object. Users are pushed back from the apparition of the computer screen, and forced to come to terms with its physicality, its existence in material surroundings. *Shadow, Glare* creates an unsettling to-and-fro. As with the videos, viewers are invited to enter the image's literalizing depths while also confronting its surface—seeing it as an object with a material density. Here, however, Shirreff tackles those surfaces in an intimate encounter with a technological interface.

To return to the question I posed at the beginning of this essay: How does sculpture signify in a world of virtual image aggregation and exchange? This is a question that echoes a statement Walter Benjamin made in the 1930s, when, registering a surge of mass reproductions, he grappled with photography's mediating role in shaping our perception of art objects—his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," remains among the most important theories of mass reproduction. In the second, 1936 version of this essay, he forecast sculpture's obsolescence in the twentieth century: "In the age of the assembled artwork," Benjamin wrote, "the decline of sculpture is inevitable."⁵⁰ In this brief claim, which he did not expand elsewhere, Benjamin suggested that in the age of photographic display and dissemination—of artworks built on flexible, mass reproductive media, like photography and film—there would be no need for the intractable, literal medium of sculpture.

One way to describe the recent turn to the photography of sculpture would be to say that artists have imagined responses to Benjamin's prophecy by doing away with sculpture as a category of representation, to signal it virtually and pictorially instead. The cumbersome qualities of sculpture—its materiality, space, and duration—are displaced by the succinctness and planarity of a photographic frame. Take Harrison's *Voyage of the Beagle* (2007), a series of fifty-seven photographs of plinths, consumer goods, and everyday things such as mannequins and topiaries, as well as works of art. The work borrows its title from Charles Darwin's 1831–36 journey on HMS *Beagle*, which he undertook to chart the coasts of South America and to study natural history—the voyage that led to *On the Origin of Species* (1859). In *Voyage of the Beagle*, Harrison uses a taxonomic system to depict common things or sculptures; the photographs deploy a narrow framing or cropping and a close vantage point to decontextualize objects as if for study. A bronze swanlike shape, a cat-themed toilet seat, a mannequin wearing a wig—these things are transformed into autonomous art objects simply by the act of taking a picture. Elsewhere in the series, Harrison

50. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," in *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 109. For a discussion of this passage, see Sarah Hamill and Megan R. Luke, "Reproductive Vision: Photography as a History of Sculpture," in *Photography and Sculpture*, 5–6.



51. John Kelsey, "Sculpture in an Abandoned Field," in *Rachel Harrison: If I Did It*, ed. Heike Munder and Ellen Seifermann, exh. cat. (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2007), 123, as cited in Roxana Marcoci, "Daguerre's Soup: What Is Sculpture?" in *The Original Copy*, 169.

52. Roxana Marcoci has noted that Harrison's illogical system of classification and parodic collection of objects were influenced by Marcel Broodthaer's *Musée d'art moderne, département des aigles* (1968). See Marcoci, *The Original Copy*, 169. For discussions of photography as an institutional framework, see Frederick N. Bohrer, "Photographic Perspectives: Photography and the Institutional Formation of Art History," in *Art History and Its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London: Routledge, 2002), 250; Horst Bredekamp, "A Neglected Tradition? Art History as *Bildwissenschaft*," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 418–28; and Donald Preziosi, "The Panoptic Gaze and the Anamorphic Archive," in *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 54–79. For a recent discussion of Brassai's photographs, see Katharine Conley, "Modernist Primitivism in 1933: Brassai's 'Involuntary Sculptures' in *Minotaure*," *Modernism/Modernity* 10, no. 1 (January 2003): 127–40.

53. For an account of how Gabriel Orozco's photographs invoke a conceptual limit case for sculpture, see Guy Brett, "Between Work and World: Gabriel Orozco," in *Carnival of Perception: Selected Writings on Art* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2004), 96–105.

54. Thierry de Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox," *October* no. 5 (Summer 1978): 118, as discussed in Iversen, 808–11.

also defamiliarizes modernist sculptures and prehistoric standing stones through close-to framing, allowing us to see them anew.

In *Voyage of the Beagle*, the origins of sculpture are found and legitimized photographically, through the camera's frame. As John Kelsey has written of this series, "To produce sculpture is sometimes merely to notice it, to find it, usually not in the museum."⁵¹ In her parodic taxonomy—which has its roots in Brassai's 1933 *Sculptures Involontaires*, in which pieces of detritus are constituted as sculpture by virtue of the camera—Harrison suggests that photography is an institutional framework capable of sanctifying any old object as sculpture.⁵² The camera is an instrument or lens akin to the walls of the gallery or the epistemological structure of the museum. In *Voyage of the Beagle*, sculpture is invoked only as a conceptual limit case or idea thanks to photography's institutional and aesthetic powers.⁵³

For Shirreff, something different is at work. In *Roden Crater* and *Medardo Rosso, Madame X, 1896*, the time of looking is slowed, and the evolving photographic surface sheds light on what it means to see a sculpture in the literal present, to experience its unpredictable, material surfaces and morphing appearances, as if one were experiencing the sculptural object or site from different points of view, as a physical thing and an contingent image. The videos recall Leonard's photographs of trees taken in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which enact a "slow optics," to use Thierry de Duve's term, to shape space internally in the picture.⁵⁴ Not a snapshot of an event, Leonard's photographs instead mold a sculptural environment. Shirreff employs a similar aesthetic of slowness. The videos' duration analogize an expansive process of spatial perception, making the reproductive image and the sculptural object it depicts seem material and three-dimensional.

In Shirreff's videos, the elusive, time-bound processes of sculptural perception still matter to a conception of sculpture in the internet age. Together the sculptural object and its technological image frame a contingent experience. Sculpture has not disappeared—it is instead signaled as a metaphor, imagined to be a series of tactile surfaces that come alive in the video's unfolding. The photograph's transmuting, labored plane simulates a literal encounter with sculpted space, as if training us how to see in our image-saturated world.

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