

## PURE JOY

LOUIS HO

On the fourth floor of the Museum of Modern Art, presiding over the central space in one of the many labyrinthine galleries like ancient idols in a temple, sits a collection of Constantin Brancusi's sculptures. Displayed on a raised white platform, each is honored with its own pedestal. The group includes a version of his *Bird in Space* series, a slender, soaring sweep of polished metal; the *Endless Column* of octagonal forms in dark oak; *The Cock*—pointed, aggressively angular, also in wood; and *Mlle Pogany*, a bronze bust of a woman's highly stylized countenance that retains only a pair of overarching brows tapering down into a thin tip of a nose, a brief, incised line where her mouth should be, and one solitary ear.

Susan Sontag would have appreciated the portrait of Brancusi's young Hungarian friend. Its surface, burnished to a high, glossy gleam, reflects the viewer back at him/herself—photographs of it nearly always include the photographer also—and, in so doing, emphasizes a semantic duality at play: the mirror-like sheen both reinforces the subject's self-absorption, her inward gaze, as well as achieving a perfectly smooth, impenetrable exterior, thereby keeping at bay all would deconstruct it, crack its code, or, in Sontag's words, “[dig] ‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one” (Sontag 6). In her essay, “Against Interpretation,” Sontag attacks contemporary art criticism, which she views as both misguided and inadequate, for its tendency to “impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of “meanings” (7). She takes issue with how the relentless drive to interpret, to assign fixed meanings, has come to replace the direct, immediate sensory perception of any work of art, and a suitable appreciation of its aesthetic values, and the chief culprit, in her understanding of the term, is referred to as the “plucking (of) a set of elements (the X, the Y, the Z, and so forth) from the whole work” so that “X is really—or, really means—A” (7, 5). This practice of equating one thing with another, an “idea that is now perpetuated in the guise of a certain way of encountering works of art thoroughly ingrained among most people who take any of the arts seriously”, is illustrated by the film version of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a bubbling cauldron of a drama of primal emotions, misrepresented by director Elia Kazan as depicting in microcosm “the decline of Western civilization” (5, 9). In place of this proclivity to impose larger, universal meanings, Sontag argues for an approach that puts the focus squarely back where it belongs—form: “What is needed is a vocabulary—a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary—for forms. The best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of this sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form” (12). The “highest, most liberating value in art,” she declares, is “transparency,” or what is otherwise referred to (very aptly) as “experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself” (13).

The sculptures in the MoMA are immediately recognizable as Brancusi. They are starkly and powerfully linear; they are almost wholly abstract representations devoid of any distinguishing biomorphic traits, and as such they lend themselves all too easily to the Sontag-ian exemplar of pure clarity and luminescence, unencumbered by distracting intimations of “content.” Arresting the eye by their sheer, insistent presence, they demand to be noticed, and their elemental configurations—most can be reduced to a few basic, fundamental shapes—and obdurately *material* surfaces seem to resist any sort of attempt to symbolize, to allegorize and to draw analogies, i.e., to interpret. As Rudolf Arnheim demonstrates in *Visual Thinking*, however, analysis, both visual and mental, begins with the mere act of looking; our ocular and cognitive faculties share a far closer relationship than is commonly assumed, and to see is, at the same time, to interpret. Human vision is a far from passive activity; it is by nature both “purposive and selective” (19):

Through that world roams the glance, directed by attention, focusing the narrow range of sharpest vision now on this, now on that spot, following the flight of a distant sea gull, scanning a tree to explore its shape. It may refer to a small part of the visual world or to the whole visual framework of space, in which all presently seen objects have their location. . . . Some of its aspects build up fast, some slowly, and all of them are subject to continued confirmation, reappraisal, change, completion, correction, deepening of understanding. (14-15)

The “deepening of understanding” also involves the processing of information not always available to the faculties, and Arnheim adduces several examples of this phenomenon, one of which is that of our perception of shapes. He asserts that we do not see the actual shape of an object, but fit it, rather, into a pre-existing mental template to which it broadly conforms (termed visual concepts or categories), so that the moon, for instance, which can only be said to be round once a month, is seen as such when it is nearly so at other times. These visual categories also utilize the human penchant for metaphor: a dome might be “hemispherical” (though not quite exactly so), or a long, circular lampshade, “cylindrical.” A woman’s puffy, piled-up hairdo, for which an appropriate adjective is lacking, is called “cumulus-shaped.” Just as words for one object are employed in the service of another, so too does human understanding of the wider world consist fundamentally in the drawing of connections between one phenomenon and the next. We conceive of relationships or likenesses between the tangible and the intangible (“She stabbed me in the back”), for instance, or between people and things (“He’s such a blockhead”), or, to take Sontag’s terms, between X and A.

What we conceive of, then, as the unbiased and non-judgmental faculty of perception is actually anything but: “there is, therefore, no difference in principle between percept and concept” (Arnheim 28). The blurring of the divide between

objective and subjective ways of seeing was an impulse central to Brancusi's work—it was the essence of a thing that he wished to capture (indeed, a retrospective of his work organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2004 was titled “The Essence of Things”). *Fish*, an elongated, streamlined piece of grained marble, is a prime example of this reduction to sensory fundamentals, and Brancusi himself explained it thus: “When you see a fish you don't think of its scales, do you? You think of its speed, its floating, flashing body seen through the water. Well, I've tried to express just that. If I made fins and eyes and scales, I would arrest its movement, give a pattern or shape of reality. I want just the flash of its spirit” (qtd. in Jianou 14).

Art critic and historian Rosalind Krauss, in her book *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, also offers an approach to Brancusi's oeuvre that incorporates within its formalist methodology the possibility of readings on a more particular level. For Krauss, in fact, Brancusi's works are unequivocally “objects,” possessed of “the beauty and severity of mechanically functional shapes”; these finished, polished products, shorn of any experiential reference—save the evocation of industrial design—invites the viewer to a “peculiar . . . contemplation,” “a contemplation as unreceptive to analysis as the polished marble or bronze surfaces are to penetration” (100, 85-6). Form is of the essence here, but forms so uncompromisingly basic, so fiercely minimal, and so inimical to the interpretive act as to constitute a merciless denial of Sontag's despised meanings, nevertheless, in the case of *Beginning of the World*, a Brancusi work of 1924, which Krauss dubs a “final reductive statement,” acquires a reckoning of its stringent formal qualities, understood in incongruously organic terms (Krauss 96).

A tapered bronze teardrop, agleam with the characteristic Brancusi polish, *The Beginning of the World* is placed in the center of a circular metal disk, on which its lower half casts a reflection, thereby being, at the same time, the recipient of its own image, reflected by the mirror of the disk's surface, and swathed in its own shadow. By contrast, the upper half, turned toward the light (of the exhibition space), glimmers and glitters with the play of “myriad and changing visual incidents,” a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of reflected distortions that registers any and all changes in its immediate environment. It is precisely in this contrast of light and dark, movement and stasis, that Krauss locates the affective import of the piece: “It is this differential that gives to the geometry of the form something of a kinesthetic quality that recalls the feeling of the back of one's head, resting heavily on a pillow, while the face floats, weightless and unencumbered, toward sleep” (Krauss 87).

*Mlle Pogany* may be expressive of her creator's predilection for the forceful, fluid line, but her features are, in comparison to *Beginning of the World*, or to her companions in the MoMA, atypically naturalistic. To do her any justice, to acknowledge her spirit and luminousness, is to describe her in terms of images of sufficient emotional weight. The ovoid head, bearing more than a passing trace of the simian, rests tranquilly on her hands in a gentle downward tilt—the latter are clasped together in the gesture of a supplicant or a daydreaming schoolgirl, and the effect is at once tender and wistful,

and suggestive of repose, contemplation, quiet reverie. The mood is interrupted by her neck, a sleek, tubular column thrusting aside with all the rhythmic vigor of pertinacious plant growth, and which imparts to the entirety of the piece its hint of tension and arrested motion; the undercurrent of dissonance is furthered by her precarious perch on the small, square base, a tightrope walker's delicate balancing act.

Constantin Brancusi was said to have commented of his work: "I offer you pure joy." And, indeed, he does. A Brancusi epitomizes Sontag's formulation of "an erotics of art" (14). Sontag may insist upon a thing being only what it is and no more nor less, but she admits also the role that interpretation, as she understands it, plays in the full gamut of human experience: "Interpretation itself must be evaluated, within a historical view of human consciousness. In some cultural contexts, interpretation is a liberating act. It is a means of revising, of transvaluing, of escaping the dead past. In other cultural contexts, it is reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling" (7). Arnheim points the way to this unwarranted primacy of the interpretive urge by demonstrating that the dichotomy between perceiving and reasoning—which he attributes to the ancient Greek philosophers—is likewise the result of socio-historical forces, and not quite the natural function it has long been assumed to be. His implicit recognition of the various and varied reactions that any work of art produces, the consequence of complex human vision, is echoed by Krauss' reading of Brancusi's work, proceeding as it does from rigorous visual analysis to an affirmation of what are, ultimately, human values. Brancusi speaks to the viewer on multiple levels at once: he piques the curiosity, he stirs the heart; he excites the mind, he enchants the senses; he arouses that unique, particular emotion, that certain luminosity, which only aesthetic satisfaction affords us: joy.

---

## WORKS CITED

- Arnheim, Rudolf. *Visual Thinking*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969.
- Jianou, Ionel. *Brancusi*. New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1963.
- Krauss, Rosalind E. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1998.
- Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation." *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Anchor Books, 1991. 3-14.