

## 8. Manifestation from Inside Out

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### *“Yes, Somehow the More Beautiful Object is Always the More Intelligible”*

As I was pursuing my studies—I think it must have been my fourth year at Berkeley—I read Immanuel Kant under Professor Karl Aschenbrenner, whose kindness toward me I will always remember. Professor Aschenbrenner was concerned with reading Kant, not criticizing him, but I could not resist the latter. He was patient with my probing attacks in class, although some of my fellow students thought I was wasting time. When I wrote a critique that was not easy to read, Aschenbrenner spent the time and effort needed to understand it. In his comments he praised the work for its penetration, adding only that he could wish I had made the discussion “a bit friendlier to the reader.”

When I was leaving Berkeley, I told him I was working on Goethe and the relation of aesthetic experience to knowledge. He seemed to recognize the project, and remarked quietly, “Yes, somehow the more beautiful object is always the more intelligible.” That was my last conversation with the old gentleman, but his remark remained in my memory as a benchmark, acting as a guide in several investigations. I never asked him where he learned the insight, though in later years I regretted this, for I did not understand how a Kantian could entertain such an un-Kantian viewpoint. Only later did I realize that Aschenbrenner had escaped my categorizing. He was not a Kantian at all. When Georg Maier called my attention to Baumgarten, I searched the libraries for translations, but found only one, his short dissertation on poetry. I sent for it, and when I opened to the title page I found something entirely unexpected. The translator was Karl Aschenbrenner, University of California, Berkeley. He had never said a word.

The equation of beauty and intelligibility made by my professor could have been derived from Baumgarten, although it could also have come from other sources—St. Thomas Aquinas’s account of *claritas*, for instance. For our purposes here, however, I would like to approach it through experience. It will be best to begin, I think, not from beauty but from intelligibility.

Let us return for a moment to the cow. I have left the picture in its original orientation because I want to look once again at the other possible figures it presents.



Figure 1

Looking at the picture for the first time, we may easily catch the cat pouncing head down from the upper left. To the right, a little bird is to be found. Some will opt for the “bird” really being a mouse, sitting up on its hind legs. Both solutions fit as possible objects of prey for the cat. But at this stage no feeling of having grasped the situation seems to arise. There are reasons for our not being satisfied: none of the objects we have chosen to identify relates to other parts of the scene. If the cat really were pouncing on a victim, it would have to direct its movement in a more convincing way.

We have not succeeded in unifying the picture into a coherent whole. And this is precisely what will happen when the picture has been turned 90 degrees clockwise. If it is moved far enough away, many of us will need no further instruction. We will discern a head appearing on the left side of the picture. It is facing us. As soon as a head is considered, two black ears, little black eyes and a black muzzle are apt to pop up. It is as if a key were opening a door, behind which the white cow has been waiting. And the cow turns out to fill the whole area of the photograph, the right half of the picture being mainly filled by the cow's body.

Suddenly, we find ourselves facing an animal that has turned its head to face us! The sun is shining from the right. The wire fence to the far left really fits into the scene.

We have found the key to a better unity. It turned a rather chaotic pattern into an occasion to remind ourselves of the feelings we may have when encountering a cow. Somehow this encounter seems to be happening in the very present. A real encounter will not be entirely different, for in both cases what we feel in the cow's turning its attention toward us is inseparable from our own consciousness of attending to the cow. Or, to put it the other way around: something within us reveals the inside of what appears to be meeting us from the outside. We may make the following conjecture:

*Perception begins from the inside.* And it is *inside* ourselves that the “inside” of the perceptual object becomes manifest. This is rather a rash and venturesome inference. In the examples that follow, the role of our own mind in experiencing outer appearances will be of key interest.

### *Appreciating Some Examples of Historic Architecture*\*

The history of architecture presents us with different styles—for example, the Romanesque and the Gothic. As a rule, the forms of arches and vaults are the characteristic features of these different styles: the perfectly circular form represents the older, Romanesque style, while the typical Gothic arch has a sharp bend at its apex. When standing inside a vault under the Romanesque semicircular bend of masonry, we may find ourselves reminded of being inside a tunnel, deep down under the surface of the earth. On the other hand, when we stand inside the nave of a typical Gothic cathedral, the feeling of being “drawn” upward is almost inescapable. While we are certainly just looking at a construction of blocks of stone, a specific feeling is induced in our bodies that in some way connects to the mechanical aspects of the situation.

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\*This section was added by Georg Maier.

Both styles of architecture originally depended on pressure between adjacent pieces of masonry for their mechanical stability, which imposed conditions upon the structure as a whole. The more pressure is exerted on a round arch from all sides, the more stable it becomes. The Gothic arch, by contrast, can be understood to consist of supporting piers mutually carrying a load high above the ground.

Strong images can help to connect our experiences inside the respective structures with the mechanical principles we learn theoretically. The round vault may be *imagined* to be part of a tunnel, deep down in the earth. An immense pressure is being held up by the masonry of fine workmanship. There is no need to be afraid that it will buckle. Down in the tunnel, no visible allusions to the vertical dimension are present. The very opposite is true for the Gothic form. Ask someone of similar size to assist you in holding a heavy stone between you as high above your heads as the two of you can reach. Then, as you carefully move apart—just a little, as carefully as you can—each of you will represent the function of one side of a Gothic arch. The *imaginative* picture you are beginning to get will rightly reflect the delicate balance of forces you must maintain in order to hold up the heavy stone.

As soon as we become aware of the structural engineering principles of those historical forms of architecture, we can't help imagining our own body being engaged in the mechanical situation at hand. So again an inner organ, now associated with our limbs, opens up a sense for the inner coherence of such a building. It is as if a key had opened a door to a more intimate engagement with a structure that before we had examined only from afar.

Just as the photograph became richer after we recognized the cow—richer in proportion to the richness of our imagination of the cow's stare—so also can imagination enrich the experience of an edifice. As works of art lead us to an intense imaginative activity, our experience becomes a union of our inside and the world we had taken to be outside us.

### ***Brancusi***

Surely it is clear that *seeing* a work of plastic art requires a particular skill, and thus a particular knowledge. This seeing is difficult and requires effort on the part of the observer. Even as reading a work of imaginative literature, particularly poetry, demands that the reader master an uncommon use of words—the particular *diction* involved—so “seeing” a work of plastic art depends upon mastering the “viewer's diction” demanded by the work.

When a museum visitor does not find a particular painting or sculpture worth looking at, this result is usually charged to differences of taste. But there is an alternative possibility, namely, that the visitor *failed to see the work* by failing to master the required mode of perception. In this case a judgment has been made of something *other* than the work, for it has not been recognized, even as a poem remains unread by the untutored reader who can make little of it. Viewing art, like recognizing plant species, must be a matter of *knowing* before it can be a matter of appreciation. This was obviously the trouble in the court case brought by the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi against U. S. Customs (1926–28) for refusing to recognize the *Golden Bird* as a work of art. When Brancusi brought the *Bird* into New York, Customs levied a duty of \$210 on the piece for its metal value. (An art work in possession of the artist would have been tax-free.) In the subsequent court proceedings, testimony of the witnesses for the Customs authority described a piece that was not a bird, and, indeed, what they described, when used as a guide in order to perceive the work, was indeed *something that could be seen* (Giedion-Welcker 1959, pp. 212–217).

But before we look further at the Customs case, it will be well to explore the divergence of views about another work of art. Consider Figure 2 below, Brancusi's *Newborn*, done in polished bronze.

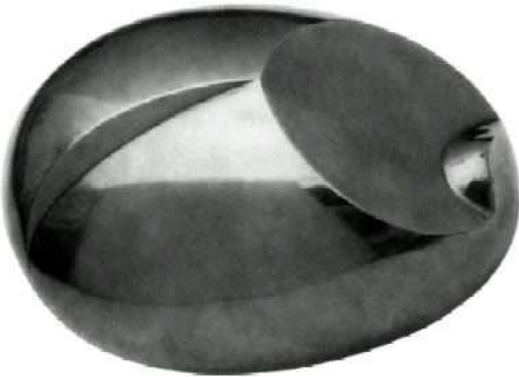


Figure 2. *The Newborn*. (From Geist 1969, p. 71.)

Some years ago I came across a critic who was led by this title to see “a gastrulating embryo” just beginning to differentiate. (I have not been able to find the reference these many years later.) The critic, I speculated at the time, had probably been looking at the work of Jean

Arp, and was unfamiliar with the particular “viewer’s diction” needed to see Brancusi. Thus, his judgment (he thought the piece successful) could apply to Figure 2 only when seen as he suggested. Others, however, have found the sculpture successful for very different reasons.

A greater familiarity with Brancusi’s works allows the viewer to place the piece within another context—another diction—by the technique of juxtaposition with other images that we used to find the eye in the Close painting. The reader need only run through the sequence of Figures 3, 4, and 5 before returning to 2. By then the necessary mode of seeing will be in place.



Figure 3. The head of *The First Step*. The facial elements are reduced to the eye-eyebrow-nose complex and the mouth. The head sat upon the body of a child taking his first step, and the total figure was so obvious that no one would have difficulty finding the context for the head. (From Geist 1969, p. 64.)

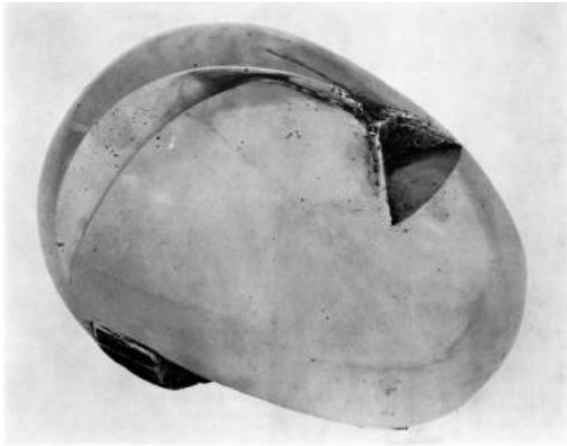


Figure 4. *The First Cry*. The curve of eye, eyebrow and nose are retained from *The First Step*, and the ear is visible. (From Geist 1969, p. 55.)

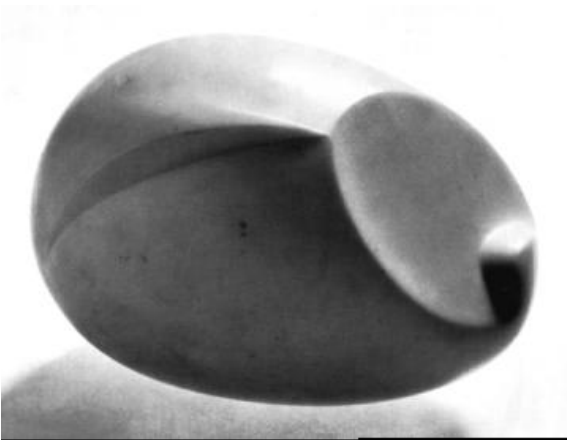


Figure 5. Marble version of *The Newborn*. The eye-nose curve now extends to a flat plane—the wide-open mouth of the infant—punctuated by the chin. If an easier viewing angle is desirable the image may be rotated 90 degrees clockwise, bringing the head upright. (From Geist 1969, p. 70.)

Brancusi's images progress toward specification of a particular object of knowledge. The series moves from a simplified representation of an infant's features to the full specification of an expressive gesture—the wide cry of the mouth. The head of *The First Step* was only part of a

greater whole that did not focus on the head (although the expression can be read as tentative—perhaps right for a first step). *The First Cry* attempts this focus, concentrating on the moment of awakening at birth (presumably when the doctor slaps the rear of the newborn to make the child use his or her lungs). In the next piece the title is replaced by *The Newborn*, dropping any reference to a cry, for this title is all we need. If the latter work is seen as an infant's head at all, it is a crying infant—howling in fact. It is a stunning improvement on the former piece. By comparison, the gesture of *The First Cry* is far more ambiguous—it might be, for instance, the “first stuffed nose.” The solution was relatively new to European art of the time, for the open mouth in the *The First Cry* was indicated by a real cavity, and thus the mouth in these works was, in one sense, more “realistic.” The flat plane of the later work, however, represents the open mouth far more definitely than the “realistic” cavity, for *The Newborn* presents the gesture rather than the geometry of the face

Again we see that the parts are dependent upon our recognition of their context, which is the whole within which they are integrated and, in this case, within which they can carry out their function. We must propose the correct whole in order to see. This is helped by the title of the piece, but once we see the head as that of a newborn, the traumatic moment becomes lucidly clear. The meaning of the perception is recognized, but the *knowing* within this recognition is of a different order than our usual perceptual recognitions. Art does not attempt anything so complex as reality, but presents only a *semblance*, and this semblance develops only that aspect of the reality under consideration. *The Newborn* strives for the gesture of the crying infant, and in doing so it refines away everything extraneous to that end. Thus the final image seems more transparent to the inward meaning than an actual child might be, although our sensitivity to the actual gesture may be improved by our understanding of Brancusi's piece.

Seeing the “transparency” to inward meaning is a perceptual ability that we all share, for it is the foundation for interpreting gesture. The briefest reflection will show that without this “diction” our ability to know the world would be catastrophically reduced. Gesture is recognized immediately, holistically, and fairly accurately, and in human affairs, or our dealings with animals, or even with plants, it is irreplaceable. Brancusi was so affected by the power of the gestures he witnessed in the world that he developed a form of sculpture to present them. His early bronze *Torment* (Figure 6), for example, done in the atelier of Rodin, was conceived when he saw an apprentice being beaten by his master, and the gesture of helpless resignation gave form to the statue. Figure 6 is a museum photograph of the piece, and, as anyone familiar with the artist will know, Brancusi also developed a photographic approach to his own work.





Figure 6. *Torment*. (From Geist 1969, p. 32.)

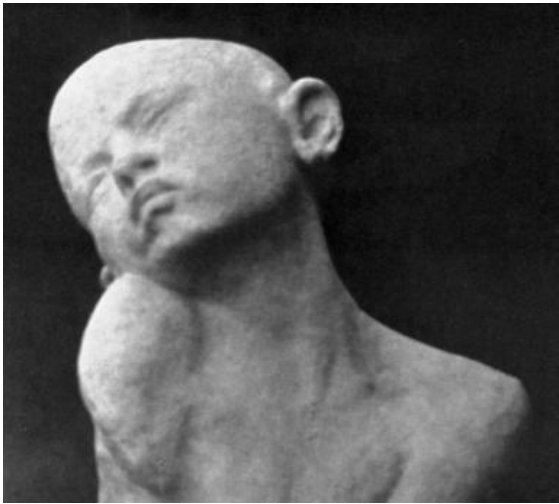


Figure 7. Plaster original for the bronze sculpture of Figure 6. (From Giedion-Welcker 1959, p. 71.)

In Figure 7 we have Brancusi's own photograph of the plaster version from which the bronze was cast. Brancusi's soft focus, shot angle, and lighting have provided a different approach to the work than the conditions of the museum photograph. The recognition of this

difference is usually instantaneous. The Brancusi photograph makes the piece more transparent to the inward meaning: the gesture and the form are clearer, the piece is more “alive” because its nature is more deeply seen, and thus known, by the viewer. Brancusi’s purpose was clearly interpretive—the diction of his photograph leads to a way to view his art. The photograph of the marble *Newborn* in Figure 5 is, of course, also made by Brancusi.

Art, or at least the sort of art that desires this end, shows us a world in which recognition requires a deep knowledge of its object, knowledge that one might even call wisdom. I do not mean the sort of wisdom that can be separated from experience, but rather just the type that is gathered from much experience. An art of this sort can present the distillation of experience to those who have learned to use their eyes. I suppose this says much about the witnesses at the Customs trial who insisted that Brancusi’s works had little or no relation to their titles. The *Bird* was not a bird, said one, nor could “any flexion of changes” bring about a resemblance.

When the earlier *Maiestra* (the name of a magical bird of a Romanian folktale—see Figure 8) was brought in, the Customs witnesses argued that while it had some resemblance to a bird it was not a competent piece, looking as if it had been executed by a savage or a child.



Figure 8. *Maestra*. (From Geist 1969, p. 51.)

The sculpture may seem odd to someone looking for a resemblance of physical detail, which it refuses to offer. When the movement of the bird, its gestural context, is considered, however, the whole impression changes. The chest and shoulder muscles, and the lifting head, bring to mind the world of birds as we see them daily, when we really see them. And of course the statue may be viewed from the opposite direction.

The photographer Edward Steichen purchased a *Maiestra* (there are several versions) and mounted it on a stone column in his garden. His daughter, seeing the sun fall on the statue, snapped a picture of it with a simple camera (Figure 9). The result is surprising. Perhaps the piece would make a good bird-warder for the garden, for from behind, with the light right, the brooding gesture of a great bird of prey is impossible to miss. This remarkable presence is created by a minimum of articulation, but that purging of unnecessary elements is what makes the piece so powerful and Brancusi's style so striking. The extreme transparency of the piece depends upon a reduction that allows our intuition of inward identity to unify the outer elements into a single gesture, giving us a world in which inner and outer approach each other closely. Notice that inner nature is revealed through outer shape because *the former brings about the organization of the latter*. Without our way of looking—the intention we advance—we could not see the bird of prey. After all, the unifying intuition belongs both to the bird, as its nature, and to us, as our knowledge.



Figure 9. (From Geist 1969, p. 50.)

## *The Evolution of Phenomena*

I can speak of the approach of inner and outer in a work of art due to the character of everyday perception, which presents a world of outsides without clear insides. The world is enigmatic just because of this character of experience. Let me explain. Perception is not knowledge *about*, which is the realm of the proposition, but immediate knowledge *of*, a direct grasp of, the perceived object. But obviously this knowledge is incomplete—I mean incomplete perceptually as well as propositionally. The intentions we bring forward in order to recognize an intelligible world are inadequate to the full task. They fall short on two fronts: they leave a great deal unknown, which we have come to only through the supplement of scientific investigation, and they leave too much *unseen*.

The nature of the perceptual image (taking sight as the model, although analogous relations will hold for the other senses) is that it can, and must, present an inner ground for the outer form. The intuition we bring forward to grasp the whole is itself that ground, but the outward form that results from its grasp will often be far less transparent to the unifying intuition than is the case with the Brancusi images above (Figures 5, 7, and 9). The reason for this is apparent in Brancusi's method. How often do we find in nature an image that is, in all details, so unified that it is as lucid as his sculptures? In any reality more is expressed than the simple nature of the thing, for the rest of the world impinges upon it. Brancusi got around the nexus of causes potentially appearing in every natural image by either refining away everything that was not the intended gesture (Figures 5 and 9) or by taking a subject whose gesture showed a total surrender to the mood it expressed (Figure 7). On occasion, as in the case of the model for *Torment*, the phenomena of the world approach this pure character, but that is the rare moment. Of course, if the world normally had this character there would be little need for art, or at least for an art of the character described here.

That we do recognize such a need suggests that we also recognize, at least subconsciously, that the normal perceptual image is incomplete. A world that was fully our own would not only be propositionally known, but would also be fully recognized. The cultivation of our powers of recognition is an accepted cultural task for each individual—we expect everyone to learn to know the surrounding world. But the fact that such cultivation remains largely an individual task rather than a community effort—unlike, say, the cultivation of scientific knowledge—is evidence that our society has taken the perceptual image to be complete for its adult members. As we have

seen, this is not true, and the average perceptual image is quite plastic and capable of considerable development.

This is why art must be given particular credit for extending our world of knowledge. The semblances constructed through artistic activity can often teach a good deal about their originals, but, more importantly, they teach the viewer about the nature of his or her perceptual images. It is largely in artistic productions that our culture incorporates knowledge of the evolution of phenomena, however tacit this knowledge seems. After all, while the unusual skills of the field botanist, gamekeeper, herb-gatherer, field geologist, and so on, remain distant and mysterious accomplishments for our cultural outlook, the skills involved in *seeing* or *hearing* artistic works are widely recognized. Unfortunately, these skills are thought to bear only upon artistic productions. Natural phenomena, in common assumption, do not call for them, and thus connections between such skills and those of the various professions mentioned are rarely made.

Yet each of these pursuits extends the powers of recognition; that is, they make the perceptual image more complete. The botanist making field identifications, for example, recognizes a species with ease because he or she has been able to make it more transparent to an organizing intuition than it was, say, as an anonymous weed. But the scientist does not have the aid of the artist's rendering in the effort to clarify vision, and therefore must be even more active than the student of art. As recognition expands it must penetrate that "nexus of causes potentially appearing in every natural image," bringing it forward in signatures that can be directly grasped by the trained observer. With further study our botanist may also be able to detect the interaction of other species and the effect of other environmental elements in the formation of the particular specimen examined *in situ*. In this manner the recognized world grows toward intelligibility.

Skills such as these have usually been thought purely individual because they could not be communicated as propositions separable from experience. Only the second clause is accurate. In the moment of recognition, perceiving and knowing are identical: *only those who see can know*, and alternately, *only those who know can see*. But if such knowledge results from a developed skill, it does not follow that it must remain individual. This unity of seeing and knowing has been central to artistic expression for ages, and both the gamekeeper and the field botanist have been able to train others to be like themselves.

At every turn in the road we see images that reveal to the sensitized eye an incomplete character and thus a potential for growth. The question I am raising is not whether we as individuals will accept the task of "helping the appearances to evolve"—although each individual decision is already an advance—but whether we will accept it as a communal task. I think it obvious that new modes of seeing carry with them new revelations of being, even as new

theoretical propositions in science carry similar import. The answer, of course, can arrive only in the somewhat distant future. The question is with us today.