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Berleant's Phenomenology of Sculptural Space: Brâncuși

Alicja Kuczyńska

Abstract

The distinction between reason and senses, until recently maintained in philosophy, has now grown to cause serious doubts. The situation requires creating new forms of cognitive continuity revealed in various levels of emotional experience. Constantin Brâncuși's art is analyzed as an example of transgression of this distinction through building a vinculum between the earthly and the heavenly and between the external and the internal. The author refutes the common attribution of Brâncuși's art to the Parisian trends or to primary organic forms. In Brâncuși's understanding, art creates its own philosophy whose aim is to attain the essence of being. Thus, the artist explores the possibilities of transgressing the domination of sight, for idea, imagination or thought expressing flight through his sculpture. He captures a fleeting moment of balance between the meeting of forces. It is constantly in *statu nascendi*, only announced, perceived by the artist right before, as anticipated. It lasts as a being in suspension. Thus, Brâncuși expresses his fascination with Plato's theory of hierarchic transcendence of consequent stages of knowledge. According to this ethos, art attempts to reach the inside of matter so as to restore the lost unity with the universe. A column, as *axis mundi*, becomes the most expressive form of communication between the human process of transgression and the transcendent ideal of eternity.

Key Words

Art; being as becoming; *The Endless Column*; environment; sculpture; space

“As an art of space, sculpture transcends its physical bounds. It pushes out past the limits of separateness to create its own environment.”

Arnold Berleant[1]

1. Introduction

The search for traces of Plato’s thought, or Platonic thought, in contemporary art is more than just one of many attempts to find the presence of the past in our world of appearances. The latter goal is carried out successfully anyway by historical research. With art, however, something more is at stake here—the shaping of a new kind of sensitivity. It has become obvious that the dualism of reason and the senses can be questioned.[2] The imperative of absolute spiritual independence, permanently written into all artistic self-awareness, has effectively covered all the paths where the tracks of the past have mixed and mingled in creative acts. This phenomenon becomes particularly pronounced when various cultures meet at a crossroads facing each other. These cultures are in possession of divergent visions of their own origins; they have diverse social, ethnic and religious determinations. Out of these meetings of cultures, the historical baggage that is often perceived as a burdensome heritage can unexpectedly lead to a flourishing of imagination, emotion, and cognitive impressions and new forms of expression. When this happens, the aversion of critics or artists to one definite philosophy need not block other kinds of cultural relations. We may feel or notice a kindred spirit to some degree, even when the cultural currents in question appear very distant from one another.

2. Towards elemental energies

These remarks relate to the critique of Brâncuși, milder today but still audible, as an abstract sculptor. In the light of new research on the sources of Brâncuși’s creativity, the question of Brâncuși seems to be much more complex and multifarious than critics would have it—critics who, until recently, focused above all on two main influences. First was the artistic atmosphere surrounding Brâncuși’s Paris workshop. Here, the possible influences were limited by Brâncuși’s attitude: he himself tended to emphasize his own uniqueness when it came to his perception of the world.[3] Arnold Berleant, in his

remarks, "Brâncuși and the Phenomenology of Sculptural Space," underscores the conscious artistic independence Brâncuși felt from artists he knew and sometimes befriended, including Isamu Noguchi, Marcel Duchamp, August Rodin, and Henri Matisse.[4] Second, Brâncuși's works also reveal his ongoing fascination with the world of primal organic forms. This source of inspiration is apparent both in his choice of the themes and the shapes of the sculptures. For Eliade, the impact of the Parisian avant-garde, combined with that of remote archaic art from Africa, forced him to undergo a process of interiorization towards his own rustic traditions, with the effect that he came to see the creative potential of the latter.[5] Brâncuși often invokes folk art, above all Romanian, including myths and cosmic archetypes. There are also patriotic emotions coming through in his sculptures, the memories of heroes who have fallen in the defense of their country during wartime. "Blazing a trail that combined contemporary civilization and the oldest traditions, Brâncuși felt no threat from the normativity characteristic of the work of his contemporaries who persisted with the conventions of classical post-Rodin figures." [6] His art, as Berleant aptly puts it, does not relate to the "geometry of the physical world as did the cubists, not to the technology of the industrial world as did the constructivists." [7] As Brâncuși understands art, it creates its own philosophy; it *is* philosophy. [8] Let us also add that this is a philosophy with a definable provenance, one in pursuit of the essence of things.

3. Freely chosen kindred spirit

Eliade believed that Brâncuși's genius was his ability to find a real source for the forms he intended to create.[9] More and more frequently we hear the justified claim that he found these sources in Plato's philosophy and its later incarnations. At the symposium organized by the *International Society for Neoplatonic Studies* (Rethymno, Crete 2000), the interpretation of chosen sculptures of Brâncuși as forms, particularly visualizations of Plato's philosophy and Neoplatonism, won both supporters and critics.[10] The critics, representatives of the idea of the "pure" forms of sculpture, referred above all to the artistic atmosphere of Paris and the reigning fascination with abstract art. Besides that, the Platonic Ideals to be sought in the sculptures undoubtedly underwent transformation, thereby departing from their classical originals. On the other hand, interpretations that went beyond the purely formal invoked the suggestive conceptions of Eliade, who intuitively found messages hidden in Brâncuși's works. In these arguments over the original inspirations behind Brâncuși's work, I suppose the popularity of Eliade, the-author, and Eliade, the-man, played a

large role as he directed critical attention to the more general, philosophical content of Brâncuși's oeuvre. At the present time, several new publications have appeared, referring to statements made by Brâncuși about Platonism, among other things. It is also significant that suggestions of the philosophical-aesthetic sources in Plato's views found additional confirmation in Brâncuși's biography, his stay at the Romanian Academy of Art, and his studies of sculpture and Platonic aesthetics and art theory, even including Neoplatonic metaphysics. Key elements of his reading turned around selected Platonic dialogues—the Lysis, Protagoras, Phaedrus and the Symposium—dialogues that were close to him until the end of his life in Paris.[11]

4. Overcoming the human condition

Brâncuși made a well-known declaration: "All my life I have sought the essence of flight. Flight — what bliss." [12] This does not only reveal the passionate atmosphere surrounding the search for the right mode of expression in terms of formal means; it also reveals the corresponding goal: The formal means aim to go beyond the borders of the human condition, to go beyond the material. In reducing the number of elements so as to represent a thing, the artist actually approaches its essence. [13] Here the sculpture is a synthesizing figure, and its very creation also plays a role in the image of the whole. By penetrating the borderlands of being, the artist sets the goal of researching the existence of the sculpture itself, in space. More than that, it attempts to go beyond the domination of sight for the sake of the idea, imagination, or even thought itself. This process is indicated by the almost minimalist shapes, for example, with the sculpture, *The Kiss*. Two people are stripped of any possible variation of detail thereby reducing the meaning of the work to the revelation of an essence of unbreakable unity, a union against the world. It is not hard to hear an echo of the text of Plato's Symposium in the background.[14] In his search for an absolute affirmation of being through sculpture, Constantin Brâncuși gradually, but determinedly, broke through the borders separating art from traditional philosophy so the proper realization of philosophy could become art. Art expanded gradually to encompass more than the traditional field of the work of art, and the expectations towards art changed to go beyond the traditional conception of a more or less penetrating view of the world as seen by our eyes.

The philosophy of Brâncuși's work occupies a subtle area between the external and the internal. Brâncuși was convinced that the real meaning of being cannot be captured by the external or surface imitation of things. Yet he did not seek

imitative or abstract forms to express his vision.[15] In Brâncuși's work, an express desire to stay away from direct imitation predominates, without departing completely from the nature of the object. E. Grabska explains the process like this: "How can we grasp this non-literal, displayed meaning of a sculpture today, especially when its 'thematic' neutrality cannot be reduced to once interpretable symbols, signs or allegories? (...) in the face of this encounter with the iconographically conditioned 'imagination', the sculpture draws our attention by means of other meanings that are closer to the archetype or by means of the genealogical status of its collective memory." [16] These imaginations were not intended to enable him to reach the essence of the object. This role, according to Brâncuși, was to be played, above all, by the invocation of primal, immemorial, mythical sources that give birth to new associations and new meaningful encounters. Can the essential, the internal, thereby become visible?

5. Take-off announced

In Brâncuși's sculptures, the relationship of inner and outer acquired a new dimension: a meeting of two manifestations of existence, in a sense analogous to the Choice of Hercules at the crossroads.[17] In this dynamic of meeting, we can observe a certain fleeting moment when both forces equal each other. However, in contrast to the ancient myth, with Brâncuși this moment is not externalized as something absolutely permanent. It has the ephemeral status of constant being *between* as a peculiar state of "announced but as-yet unmaterialized," felt by the artist as *just before*, expected. It continues as *suspended* being. What is essential is not so much what is as what is about to be. For Brâncuși, the key is to reveal that what does not yet exist—pure possibility, independent of any understanding it may come to enjoy—is important, even more important than what already is, what is accessible to the senses. Berleant puts the point about thought and expectation with reference to movement with the sculpture of turtles: "in its final version the Turtle endeavors 'to fly away', as Brâncuși put it. This quality of potential movement is an element of sculptural space." [18] This preparation for movement, directed to the outside, to the surrounding space, has the effect that the sculpture enters into a unique, allusive relationship with its environment. This is a kind of escape beyond the specifics of sight; in this way the works acquire their proper status as "*being between*." Brâncuși seems to be expressing a Neoplatonic conception of being as "becoming." The essence of things persists as a kind of *suspension*, as if it were outside of the normal course of time;

the essence is presented without the shapes that characterize everyday reality; there is no point in duplicating the usual forms.

The task of the artist and his or her talent is to provide this fragile, delicate essence with an expected and appropriate form. In his work, Brâncuși attempts to capture this moment, to preserve it in material that has been especially dedicated to this goal. The many hours spent polishing the surface of the sculpture is not only, as is commonly assumed, care for the effects of light, but also, and perhaps above all, an indication of the relativity of the look of things and how that may depend on numerous factors like the changing nature of light—flashing, shaking, uncertain—awoken by the oval shape of the head, similar to a cosmic egg. For Brâncuși, the oval, egg-like form is not only a perfect shape but a symbol of life: the beginning of the world. What flickers gives birth and, depending on the positioning of the object, exposes or hides qualitative features of the material. This is especially so when the object is one that can be elicited from its material by the use of changing shine achieved by polishing, for example, metal or marble, as in the *Sleeping Muse* or *The Beginning of the World*, “where the symbolic form of the beginning – the egg – miraculously emerges from the light/shade conflict.”[19] By means of a flash, a moment of light, Brâncuși wished to disclose a longing for transcendence, an undefined nostalgia for the extra-conceptual—a zone of experiences beyond the uncertainty and fragility of human being. As if rebelling against their own metaphysical expression, the majority of Brâncuși’s sculptures are firmly grounded on material bases. The base gives subtle, fragile figures a solid weight. It provides balance, rooting the figures in a real structure. In fact, the base represents an integral, intentional part of the whole, although the contrast between the sculpture itself and its “soil” is, to say the least, ambiguous.

6. Vertical/horizontal

Brâncuși seems to have been fascinated with the Platonic theory of being, its transgression of subsequent, hierarchical degrees of knowledge. In line with this ethos, Brâncuși’s art aims “to free himself from the *surface* of things and to penetrate matter in order to lay bare its ultimate structures,” regaining a lost sense of unity with the world and the universe.[20]

In the spirit of this philosophy, the fullest expression of transcendence is humanity, because only humanity is capable of being aware of its own existence. We may evaluate our existence on the basis of a “departure” into reflection outside of oneself, thereby realizing our own subjectivity. This

simultaneous externality towards the internal act of consciousness, towards the knowing subject, only is possible for human beings. Only humans are able to transcend themselves and reproduce their own activity. They possess the ability to objectify some of their own features without thereby reducing the whole of their being to an object.

The Endless Column—following its renovation, once again to be found in Târgu Jiu, Romania—can be interpreted in at least three different ways. 1) On the basis of its similarity to the Neoplatonic *vinculum*, it is a bond connecting what is highest to what is lowest, heaven and earth.[21] 2) It is a symbol of the everlasting memory of the heroism of patriots and the honoring of those who fell in defense of their country. And 3) it is an expression of the bonds and kindred spirit holding between the East and West.[22] The multiple levels of interpretation the Endless Column possesses is the result of (our assumption of) the universality of ideas representing the world of Brâncuși's thought. The column is made of fifteen semi-steel rhomboidal modules comprising a simple overall form that the artist himself referred to as a "stairway to heaven." With *The Endless Column*, Brâncuși invokes the prehistorically widespread motif of the "Heavenly Column," encountered later on in Romanian folklore. The *axis mundi* supports the sky, at the same time ensuring communication between heaven and earth. It also serves to mark the center of the world. So, the endless column is not only a support for the sky: *The Endless Column* stands between heaven and earth.

This simple shape intrigues and fascinates and, until today, has been the subject of numerous interpretations, among which Eliade's is particularly worthy of note.[23] Eliade wrote a three-act drama with the same title as Brâncuși's *The Endless Column*. [24] The hero of the work is the elderly Brâncuși, appearing in the form of a sage from Plato's dialogues. The Platonic atmosphere of a symposium is also enhanced by the figure of a mysterious young girl, a kind of contemporary Diotima, one who *knows more*. The message of the text represents a verbal interpretation of the *Column* that can be expressed as the view that there are two dimensions of time. First, there is eternal sacred time, motionless time. There is no before or after; there is no passing of time, no aging.[25] This time is reversible, like mythical time made present. Human time, on the other hand, passes; it is subject to the strict rules of beginning and end, change that we are all subject to. Participation in myth and mythical time affords us the possibility of breaking out of everyday time. This participation is close to the need to "communicate the world of experience as meaningful by

relativization to the unconditioned reality that intentionally binds phenomena.”[26] Eliade sketched an internally conflicted attitude of the average viewers of the *Column* confronting a unique phenomenon; the viewers (mothers searching for their lost children) desire the column and yet are afraid of any firm contact with it. In Act II, the young poet asks the hero, Brâncuși: “*Maestre?* Is the Column a symbol of the human condition or isn’t it?” “Don’t ask me – says Brâncuși – I made you the Column to remind you that way to heaven is hard. It’s difficult. You can’t get there by flying like the birds. You must climb, and any climb is hard. Sometimes you even climb with your hands as well as your feet.”[27]

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Endnotes

[1] Arnold Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Abington, UK: Routledge, 2004), via EBSCO Publishing: eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), accessed on Jan. 16, 2020, 5:43 AM via UNIWERSYTET WARSZAWSKI, AN: 1480917 ; Account: s9253487.main.edseb, p. 146.

[2] See: Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics*.

[3] Brâncuși himself was critical of these opinions: "Brâncuși flared up whenever he heard anyone say "abstract, people who call my work 'abstract' are imbeciles; what they call 'abstract' is in fact the purest realism, the reality of which is not represented by external form but by the idea behind it, the essence of the work." Louis Slobodkin, *Sculpture, Principles and Practice* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1949).

[4] "Working at a time and place in which art flowered into a fusion of strange and exotic shapes, much of Brâncuși's sculpture exemplifies a reverse tendency, reaching for its inspiration back to the classical, the pure, the eternal stature of that art." Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, p. 141.

[5] See: Mircea Eliade, "Brâncuși and Mythology," in *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[6] Elżbieta Grabska, "Brâncuși, Giacometti i tradycja figury" ("Brâncuși, Giacometti and the Tradition of Figures"), in *Fermentum massae mundi, Jackowi Woźniakowskiemu w siedemdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin (Fermentum massae mundi, Essays in honor of Jacek Woźniakowski on his 70th birthday)* (Warsaw, 1990), p. 505.

[7] Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, p. 142.

[8] Florence M. Hetzler, ed., *Art and Philosophy: Brâncuși, The Courage to Love* (New York, Bern, Frankfurt/M., Paris: Peter Lang, 1991); F Hetzler, "Art is Philosophy and Beyond Philosophical Thinking," *Romanian Review*, 2-3-4 (1982), xxxvi.

[9] See: Mircea Eliade, "Brâncuși and Mythology."

[10] See: Alicja Kuczyńska, "The Epiphany of Traces in Art: Post-Visualisation of the Invisible," in *Neoplatonism and Contemporary Thought, Part Two*, ed. R.B. Harris (New York: SUNY Press, 2002).

[11] "Lysis, Protagoras, Phaedrus and The Symposium (TM) Brâncuși surely read this book many times, which is why it disintegrated. He certainly knew The Republic." See: E. Shanes, *Constantin Brâncuși* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989).

[12] Cited in Terry Ann R. Neff, *An Uncommon Vision: the Des Moines Art Center* (Des Moines Art Center, 1998), p. 66.

[13] Brâncuși was criticized for a particular kind of reductionism towards the real shape of things by H. Moore among others: "While recognizing Brâncuși's historical importance in the

development of contemporary sculpture, Moore finds his one-cylindrical forms too simple <almost too precious>." Herbert Read, *Art and Alienation, the Role of the Artist in the Society* (London: Horizon Press, 1967), s. 129.

[14] "At last, after great effort, Zeus had an idea. [...] "I think I have a plan," he said, "that would allow human beings to exist and stop their misbehaving: they will give up being wicked when they lose their strength. So I shall now cut each of them in two. At one stroke they will lose their strength and also become more profitable to us, owing to the increase in their number. [...] So saying, he cut those human beings in two, the way people cut sorb-apples before they dry them..." Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, 191 c-d, *The Complete Works of Plato*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), pp. 473-474.

[15] The site of the literal is taken by *speculation* treated as a permanent state. Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 17.

[16] Grabska, "Brâncuși, Giacometti i tradycja figury," p. 505.

[17] See Erwin Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst* (Berlin 1930).

[18] Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, p. 144.

[19] The meaning expressed by the sculpture was clearly brought out in the photographs that the artist himself took. See: Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), p. 192.

[20] Eliade, *Occultism*, p. 17.

[21] In the renaissance version of Neoplatonism, a permanent circulation of energy (*circuitus spiritualis*) is emphasized, connecting what is most important with what is most base, the material (*Vinculum*).

[22] Florence M. Hetzler, "Eastern and Western Language, Thought and Reality Meet in the Philosophy and Art of Constantin Brâncuși," in *Death and Creativity* (New York: Health Sciences Publishing, 1974). I would like to stress that Florence Hetzler was the author of work on Brâncuși, in addition to founding the *International Brâncuși Society*. Attaching great importance to the spontaneous circulation of knowledge about Brâncuși, she provoked much discussion that went beyond the usual institutional structures. The Society had a spectacular impact on the cultural intelligentsia of the last generation, which

found expression in numerous conferences and symposia. But, the initial energy accompanying these early stages did not persist to the same extent in later thought on art and aesthetics.

[23] See Florence M. Hetzler, "Introduction: Two Views of Infinity," *Dialectics and Humanism*, 10 (1983), 1-3.

[24] Eliade's work was put on, for example, in the Sala Laudamo of Teatro Vittorio Emanuele. As Eliade wrote in his diary, extracts from *The Endless Column* were performed at the Notre Dame conference, with Miles Coiner directing and playing the role of Brâncuși—brilliantly, in Eliade's opinion. Eliade also heard the presentation of Florence Hetzler (Fordham University), entitled *Introductory Remarks on Eliade and Brâncuși*. See: M. Eliade, *Journal III, 1970-19*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan, p. 307. At the 1983 World Congress of Philosophy in Montreal, Florence Hetzler directed *The Endless Column*, herself playing the role of Diotima.

[25] Alicja Kuczyńska, "Symposium," *Dialectics and Humanism*, 10 (1983), 1-3.

[26] Polish original: "przekazywania świata doświadczenia jako sensownego przez relatywizację do nie warunkowej rzeczywistości wiążącej celowo zjawiska," Leszek Kołakowski, *Obecność mitu* [*The Presence of Myth*] (Paris 1972), p. 12.

[27] Mircea Eliade, "The Endless Column" ["Coloana nesfartita"] translated from Romanian by Mary Park Stevenson, *Dialectics and Humanism*, 10, 1-3 (1983), p. 70.

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