

HAPTIC VISUALITY IN "LES SCULPTURES DE PICASSO"

Alma Mikulinsky • Colloque Picasso Sculptures • 26 mars 2016

The year 1949 saw the release of *Les Sculptures de Picasso*, a photographic catalogue devoted to Picasso's three-dimensional works published by Éditions du Chêne. A collaboration with the artist himself, the album consists of over two hundred photographs depicting two hundred and eighteen sculptures created in the course of Picasso's fifty-year career. This was the first time such a broad presentation of Picasso's sculptures took place, and it revealed the artist's continuous, life-long engagement with the sculptural medium.

This paper argues that the different components of the catalogue—from Brassai's photographic process to the photographs themselves, the editorial decisions and the album's layout—work together to generate a haptic experience of art viewing. The catalogue's reader is encouraged to experience the book through a visual simulation of tactility, an experience that collapses sculptor, photographer, and viewer.

This reading is informed by scholarly interest in synaesthetic and haptic approaches to visuality thus opposing traditional narratives which highlight modernism's tendency towards opticality. Media theorist Laura U. Marks, for example, argues that one's sensation of the world is not neatly divided into five distinct senses. Alternatively, she defines the relationship between haptic and optical images as existing on opposite ends of the same spectrum. Marks suggests that haptic images emphasize tactility, impermeability, weight, texture, and bodily associations by inviting a viewing experience that focuses on the image's material properties; in contrast, optical images stress legibility and coherence by portraying a figurative object.¹ Joining this approach, as well as the work of scholars such as

Adam Jolles and Janine Mileaf,² I argue that the different components of *Les Sculptures de Picasso* offer a view of the objects that is rooted in the medium's physicality and felt through the viewer's own experience of embodiment. While photography is often seen as a vehicle of opticality, because it translates things into the visual field, Brassai's photographs actually produce haptic, touchable images whose visuality evokes the material presence of the object over sheer visuality.

In *Conversations avec Picasso*, Brassai's text on his working relationship with the artist, the photographer describes the first work he photographed for the album, the monolithic piece *Death's Head*. He claims to have taken careful steps to create an image that would "retain the sculpture's three-dimensionality." First, he intimately and physically familiarized himself with the sculpture. Instead of encircling the sculpture in order to see it from all sides, Brassai held *Death's Head* in his hands and, "turn[ed] and re-turn[ed] it." By doing so he gained visual knowledge of the object's appearance, a sensation of its volume and weight, and an impression of the tactile qualities of its surface variations, in a process that brought together touching, seeing, visualizing, and image-making. Then he arranged the space in preparation for the photograph. He again preferred physical engagement: "rarely look[ing] into the frosted glass," instead he calculated the distance between the object and camera with a piece of string.³

Brassai's text highlights his tactile and physical engagement with the works he was photographing, describing his method as based predominantly on holding, handling, and sensing the object. As will be showed momentarily, this affected his photographs as well;

the images produce a way of seeing and knowing that calls upon multiple senses. The photographs offer a method of sensory analysis that does not depend on the presence of literal touch but provides a simulation of tactility, even if it remained an imaginary or virtual potential. This could be proved by examining analyzing some of the forty-four contact sheets the photographer compiled for the *Les Sculptures de Picasso* project.⁴ The contact sheets include 403 photographic proofs from the original negatives that represent both the photographs appearing in the album, and, most usefully, images that did not end up in the book which help one unravel the selection process.

Brassaï photographed *Death's Head* six times, proofs which he numbered, lettered, and compiled on a single contact sheet in a combination that ignores the alphabetical order and thereby begins the editorial process; the top row contains, from the left, images 11D, C, and E, and the bottom row 11, 11B, and 11A (fig. 1). While all photographs show the sculpture placed on a surface in front of a neutral backdrop, subtle differences set the six images apart as they vary in angle, frame, point of view, lighting, and sense of volume. For example, 11E shows *Death's Head* when tilted slightly to the left with a strong spotlight directed at its forehead, elements that cause the monolith to appear distorted. Both 11E and 11A depict unequal proportions between the object and its background, thus diminishing the perception of the scale of Picasso's piece. The dramatic shadows of 11B generate a menacing dramatic effect but also obscure its left half. The two photographs selected for the album, 11 and 11C, enlarge the work's size and enhance its

volumes beyond its actual size of 29 centimeters in a way that imparts monumentality (figs. 2 and 3).

This constructed monumentality is Brassaï's signature style in *Les Sculptures de Picasso*; all the photographs in the album share this trait of increased scale. Brassaï's images prevents the viewer from gauging the sculptures' actual size. Throughout the book there is no distinction between large and small sculptures; instead, the photographs give the illusion that all the works share the same monumental scale, a fact that is especially striking because the majority of Picasso's sculptures are small in size: about fifty percent are under twenty centimeters tall.

Nevertheless, this distortion of the works' size in favor of a single monumental scale also causes the photographs to communicate a heightened attention to materiality, thus highlighting the material presence of the image. In the two aforementioned photographs of *Death's Head*, the sculpture's massiveness is amplified, as the photographs emphasize its density, solidity, and compactness. The images also highlight the difference in textures within the piece, which transitions from the relative smoothness of the forehead and the area above the left eye to the rougher textured chin and the nose cavity, thus making the head resemble a skull, with the details seemingly consumed by time. As in the rest of the album, the images evoke a visuality that brings to mind multiple forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinaesthetics, that allows for an imaginary participation of the body in the viewing experience—that is to say, an estimation of the object's textures, uneven surfaces, and weight. While loss of scale avoids reference to the body as a point

of measurement—that is to optical categories such as size and ratio—this simulation of tactility provides an alternative link to one’s own embodiment through an evocation of virtual identification with the tactile qualities of the works.

This point is furthered when examining the order in which the sculptures appears in *Les Sculptures de Picasso*. Brassai tells us in his memoir that it was Picasso himself who suggested the general chronological framework for the album and that the picture-editing process of *Les Sculptures de Picasso* was a joint venture by Picasso, Brassai, and the publisher, Maurice Girodias.⁵ While the album indeed follows chronological order, the layout reveals other aesthetic and rhetorical concerns. At times it forges equivalence and relationships, mostly in order to present individual objects as a part of a series, but on other occasions it displays juxtaposition of distinct objects, a principle of dissimilarity intended to highlight the diversity of Picasso’s oeuvre. On a few occasions the organization of *Les Sculptures de Picasso* diverges from both chronological considerations and the methods just mentioned. These rare moments function as framing devices that enhance the tactile experience promoted by the photographs. By breaking from the overarching organizing principles, the layout helps foster an interpretation of the album that connects the viewing, reading, and photographing experiences with the process of making the objects. Once again it creates a framework of haptic visuality that engages the viewer through the experience of embodiment. This occurs through the introduction of the hand motif, seen on the album’s cover – which will be analyzed shortly—and again in its first and last

images which will not be discussed in this essay. This emblem makes literal the theme of touching and also promotes a wide range of associations related to the idea of tactility. Touch thus becomes the interpretive lens and framing device through which the objects in the catalogue are understood.

The cover displays a detailed and highly realistic sculpture of *Picasso’s hand* (fig. 4). The sculpture depicts a palm, open as if available for inspection: the five fingers are extended without space between them, turning the hand into a continuous surface over which the eye can travel while exploring its shape, fingerprints, lines, creases, and mounds. The realism of these details was achieved through an imprinting technique, as opposed to laborious and careful modeling. Picasso described this method in 1933. He placed his palm into wet, malleable material, and after it dried, the trace left by the hand was used as a mold. Plaster was poured in, transferring the negative imprint in the material into a positive image, a three-dimensional, freestanding object.⁶ To my view, the choice of imprinting and casting techniques blurs the distinction between Picasso’s real hand, the trace it leaves behind, and the sculpture.

Consider the similarities between *Picasso’s Hand* and Jacques Derrida’s definition of the signature as a performative site where the self is presented through a play of presence and absence. Derrida says:

By definition, a written signature implies the actual or empirical nonpresence of the signer. But ... it also marks and retains his having been present in a past now, which will remain a future now, and therefore in a now in general in the transcendental

form of "nowness (maintenance). This general maintenance is somehow inscribed, stapled to present punctuality, always evident and always singular, in the form of a signature."⁷

Both *Picasso's Hand* and the Derridian idea of the signature bring out the absence of the subject, as well as an imaginary evocation of presence resulting from transcendental functions of nowness. The imprint of the hand in the form of a three-dimensional sculpture substitutes for the artist's real presence and maintains it at the same time. This sort of "having been there"—a proof of that which has happened and that is still happening due to this material relic—was also identified as one of photography's inherent traits by Roland Barthes.⁸

This quality of the sculpture is accentuated by its reproduction on the album cover. This photograph, like all of Brassai's images for the book, imparts monumentality to the object. The choice of frontal view and close-up, together with the cover's black background make the hand seem much larger than that of any viewer. Yet, the original photograph, seen on contact sheet 24, where the sculpture appears against a neutral background, has a different impact on its perceived scale (*fig. 5*). Even though it appears abstract on the cover, the hand is actually the only image in the album that is reproduced to scale and unlike the other photographs' in the volume whose size is dictated by the format of the page, the image of *Picasso's Hand* is the size of Picasso's real hand.

Awareness of the power of scale accentuates the categorical confusion between the artist's actual hand and

the sculpture. The life-size photograph of the work continues the blurring of boundaries and its resulting fluctuation between real presence and trace. The reproduction of this detailed and realistic image at this scale stimulates the viewer to engage with the work not just visually but also physically, by placing his or her hand atop that of the master, virtually touching it, and entering into a wishfully intimate social transaction with the artist. This makes real the haptic experience encouraged by the photographs in the album, recreating Brassai's own engagement when photographing the cover image and the other objects as well.

To conclude my talk today argued that the different components of *Les Sculptures de Picasso* work together to generate a kinesthetic viewing of Picasso's three-dimensional oeuvre, an experience which offers an haptic engagement with the artist's sculptures by making literal the connection between the act of object making, photographing, and viewing through the lens of tactility and touch.

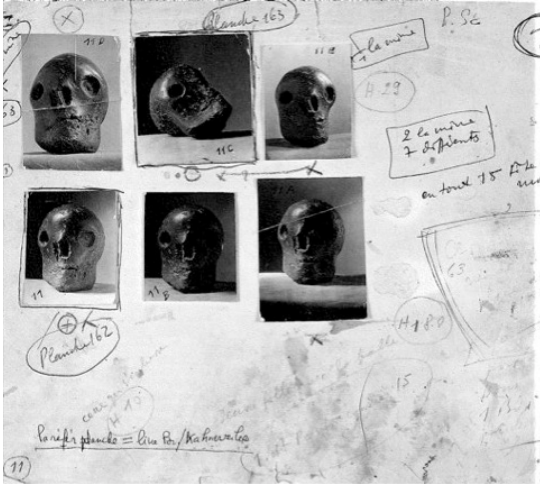


FIG. 1 BRASSÄI

Picasso's Sculptures 1, contact sheet no. 1, 1946–49. Nos. 11–11e, "Death's Head," bronze, 1943
Gelatin silver proofs pasted on cardboard and annotated by the photographer, 24 x 32 cm
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
©Estate Brassäi



FIG. 3 BRASSÄI

Picasso's "Death's Head," 1943
épreuve gélatino-argentique, 28,5 x 22,2 cm
© Succession Picasso, 2016
©Estate Brassäi

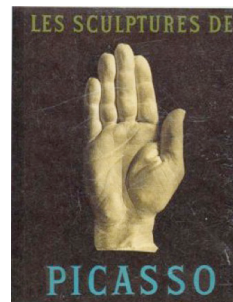


FIG. 4

Couverture des Sculptures de Picasso, Paris, Éditions du Chêne, 1948
©Estate Brassäi



FIG. 2 BRASSÄI

Picasso's "Death's Head," 1943
épreuve gélatino-argentique, 28,5 x 22,2 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris.
MP1996-189
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée Picasso de Paris) / Daniel Arnaudet
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FIG. 5 BRASSÄI

Picasso's "Hand," 1943
épreuve argentique, 12,3 x 17,3 cm
Paris, musée national Picasso - Paris. MPPH1996-238
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NOTES

1. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp.162–164 and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

2. Adam Jolles, “The Tactile Turn: Envisioning a Postcolonial Aesthetic in France,” *Yale French Studies* 109 (2006): pp.17–38 and *The Curatorial Avant-Garde: Surrealism and Exhibition Practice in France 1925–1941* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2013), pp.138–173; Janine Mileaf, *Please Touch: Dada and Surrealist Objects after the Readymade* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2010).

3. Brassai, *Conversations with Picasso* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 50.

4. The contact sheets, 24 x 32 cm cardboard paper onto which the photographer attached silver-gelatin proofs are kept in the Fonds Brassai at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. They were exhibited once in the year 2000 as a part of a Picasso-Brassai exhibition at the Musée Picasso in Paris and reproduced in its catalogue. Anne Baldassari, *Brassai/ Picasso Conversations avec la Lumière* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1999).

5. Brassai, *Conversations with Picasso*, 50.

6. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, “Huit entretiens avec Picasso [1933–1952],” *Le Point: Revue Artistique et Littéraire* (October 1952): p.24. (author’s translation)

7. Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p.20.

8. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).