Aisthesis

Photographing Sculpture: Aesthetic and Semiotic Issues

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Abstract. The essay aims to outline an epistemology of photography through the critical issues that arise from the encounter between photography and sculpture. In particular, it investigates the aesthetic and semiotic constraints that define the specificity of the photographic look with respect to a sculptural three-dimensional vision. The relationship between documentary and art photographs is the main area of research; specifically, the essay tries to highlight the interpretative value that can also be attributed to documentary photography, underlining the boundaries of a complex distinction. A specific section is devoted to Medardo Rosso's photographs of his own sculptures. Rosso's work solicits a reflection on the status of photography and on some theoretical problems such as reproducibility, the relationship between original and copy, and the creative gap produced by variation in a series. The artist suggests a peculiar "grammar" of photography by virtue of his relationship with another art – sculpture.

Keywords. Sculpture, art photography, documentary photography, Medardo Rosso, reproducibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

The essay will try to outline an epistemology of photography through the critical issues that arise from the encounter between photography and sculpture. Photography is considered a «theoretical object» capable of conveying, through individual occurrences, a reflection on the status of the photographic medium. «Theoretical object«» is a concept that refers specifically to H. Damisch's works. It is well summarised by the author in a conversation with Y.A. Bois, D. Hollier and R. Krauss:

> A theoretical object is one that is called on to function according to norms that are not historical. It is not sufficient to write a history of this object. It's what I said before: it's not enough to write a history of a problem for that problem to be resolved. A theoretical object is something that obliges one to do theory; we could start there. Second, it's an object that obliges

you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself. While I worked on perspective I began to have aperçus whit regard to the history of science that are not at all traditional; I began, that is, to produce theory. Third, it's a theoretical object because it forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory.

But I never pronounce the word theory without also saying the word history. Which is to say that for me such an object is always a theoretico-historical object. Yet if theory is produced within history, history can never completely cover theory. That is fundamental for me. The two terms go together but in the sense in which each escapes the other (Bois, Damisch, Hollier, Krauss [1998]: 8).

Following Damisch's formulation, R. Krauss (1990) considers photography as a theoretical object. The impulse to the field of the investigation of photography given by the author is considerable, and we cannot retrace it in this essay. However, it is worth mentioning that one of the aspects Krauss focuses on in her history of photography is its quality of «trace», or imprint, of the referent, following Peirce's work[1].

We will not take this sign classification to qualify the photo, but we will understand its relationship with the referent to be defined each time according to the individual photographic composition. A photograph, as this research would like to show, can be considered a document or an art object depending on the mechanisms activated within the single image.

The relationship with the referent is therefore always very complex; it is never an imprint, but rather «*forms* of the imprint«» (my emphasis), in the successful expression of J.M. Floch (1986).

The essay will therefore try to focus on some of the theoretical problems that arise from the encounter between photography and sculpture, through which it is possible to isolate some fea-

tures that distinguish the expressive «grammar» of both photography and sculpture.

For example, the problems that emerge when photography transposes a three-dimensional work onto a two-dimensional support will be analysed here. The aesthetic and semiotic constraints that define the specificity of the photographic look with respect to a three-dimensional vision will therefore be investigated.

One aspect that the essay aims to address is the relationship between documentary and art pictures, underlining the contours of their complex distinction. In particular, we will try to highlight the interpretative value attributable also to the documentary picture.

Finally, and closely connected with the previous points, there will be a section dedicated to a series of photographs taken by Medardo Rosso of his own sculptures: they are pictures that highlight some theoretical problems of photography, such as reproducibility, the relationship between original and copy, the creative gap produced by variation in a series and the relationship between documentary and art photography.

2. AESTHETIC AND SEMIOTIC CONSTRAINTS IN PHOTOGRAPHING SCULPTURE

Baudelaire's essay *Why the Sculpture is Tiresome*, written in 1846 as a commentary for the *Salon* of the same year, clarifies some critical aspects of sculpture:

Sculpture has several disadvantages which are a necessary consequence of its means and materials. Though as brutal and positive as nature herself, it has at the same time a certain vagueness and ambiguity, because it exhibits too many surfaces at once. It is in vain that the sculptor forces himself to take up a unique point of view, for the spectator who moves around the figure can choose a hundred different points of view, except for the right one, and it often happens that a chance trick of the light, an effect of the lamp, may discover a beauty which is not at all the one the artist had in mind — and this is a humiliating thing for him. A picture, however, is only what

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[1] Concerning Peirce's theory and the photography, see Sonesson (1989); Elkins (2003).

it wants to be; there is no other way of looking at it than on its own terms. Painting has but one point of view; it is exclusive and absolute, and therefore the painter's expression is much more forceful (Baudelaire [1921]: 120).

The aesthetic constraint concerning sculpture and underlined by Baudelaire is a very important clue as well for the photographic transposition of the sculpture; in particular, a sculpture photograph has to deal with the multiplicity of points of view included in each sculptural work – these cannot be transposed on the photographic medium.

The multiplicity of points of view is interpreted as a limit on the author's control over his own artwork – «for the spectator who moves around the figure can choose a hundred different points of view, except for the right one» – so the artist cannot *mediate* the viewer accesses to the work, nor can he control the aesthetic effects, subject to arbitrary factors such as exhibition or reception, generated by his sculptures.

If Baudelaire's essay focuses on some sculptural features, photographs representing sculptures address the same theoretical issues. Moreover, the comparison and *translation*[2] between these two arts can clarify the main features of both.

Through photographs the sculptor can refine his own work, as well as explore the limit and the potential of the new medium.

The relation between photography and sculpture unfolds a series of critical issues and we will try to highlight some of these by analysing some photographs of Rosso's sculptures taken by the sculptor himself.

One of our main questions is: how does the photographic transposition of sculpture transform the problematic aspects pointed out by Baudelaire's essay?

When a sculptor photographs his own creations, he imposes restrictions concerning their reception: he establishes the distance, the angle and the light through which the sculpture must be perceived. The viewer cannot move around the sculpture but is turned into a pure gaze.

How does the camera lens mediate the access to sculpture? What "instructions" are offered to the *observer* for a correct reading of the artwork[3]?

By virtue of these aesthetic "restrictions", the photographs of sculpture offer an interpretation of the sculpture itself. So it may be interesting to highlight what *comment* the photos suggest of the sculptures that they portray.

Photography is thus a creative and critical means through which the sculptor shows us how to look at his works, offering us an interpretation of them.

3. REPRODUCING THE SCULPTURE: DOCUMENTARY AND ART PHOTOGRAPHY

The relationship between sculpture and photography have been very close since the creation of the latter discipline, mainly because the fixity and whiteness of statues made them a privileged model for the first photographic cameras. In this regard, the pictures of Patroclus's bust published in *The Pencil of Nature* (1844–1846) by Talbot are famous.

However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, documentary photography of art struggled to establish itself: the «translation print» and plaster casts dominated the panorama of art reproduction.

As we learn from Giuseppe Longhi's text on engraving (1830), a book later famous for this

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[2] We use «translation» here with a semiotic meaning, that is, a reformulation within the same language (the paraphrase) but also a transposition between two texts with a different substance of expression. For instance, a translation can be the passage from one language to another, but also a transposition between two artworks with different substances and materials of expression, such as a painting into a poem, and so on (this is so-called «inter-semiotic translation»). See Jakobson (1958); Calabrese (2000); Fabbri (2000); Eco (2003); Corrain and Lancioni (2000); Dusi (2015); Sedda (2018).

[3] See the semiotic distinction between the *observer* and the *spectator*. The observer is a disembodied instance inscribed in the artwork; vice versa, the spectator is a phenomenological, historically determined subject. See Fontanille (1989); Thürlemann (1991).

subject, the translation print was considered *an original* and *not a copy*, so the author of the print was considered an author also of the sculpture.

Although they were reproductions of already existing works, and not new creations, these transcripts onto a two-dimensional support implied the introduction of a significant creative component, at least according to the prevailing opinion at the time[4].

During the second decade of the nineteenth century, thanks to the extensive use of lithography in the publishing industry, engraving became one of the privileged techniques for the reproduction of artworks.

At the same time, both for the artistic education in the academies, and for the dissemination to the public through sculpture in museums, copies in plaster were widespread practice and privileged by art historians. In this regard, the Congress of History of Art, held in Nuremberg in 1893, offers valuable testimony:

Hans Semper emphasized the handiness of casts in studying style, and claimed that more insight into the essence and development of sculpture could be obtained from an hour in a cast gallery than from any amount of poring over photographs. Casts could be walked round and touched; photographs provided a strictly limited view, flattening, foreshortening, and exaggerating the three-dimensional form (Fawcett [1995]: 80).

The plaster replica, moreover, is relevant to the issue of the reproducibility of an artwork, highlighting the tension between original and copy[5]. Following the sign classification proposed by Eco (1975), the plaster cast can be qualified as a «partial replica», where in the type–token relation the occurrence respects only some relevant properties fixed by the type, such as size, height and shape. On the contrary, matter, colour, weight are not anymore relevant for the plaster replica. In plaster, therefore, the interpretation is reduced to a minimum.

Reproductions in plaster and photography obviously are not mutually exclusive, will remain and are still co-present: the alternative arises between a partial replica and a photographic document, which poses undoubtedly more complex problems.

If photographic reproductions acquired ever-greater relevance at the end of the nineteenth century, also thanks to art publishing, the status of photography continued to be the subject of ambivalent positions. Photography was considered alternatively a mechanical reproduction without interpretation or not worthy of reproducing works of art; this is why plaster replicas – together with translation prints – were judged more favourably by the majority of art historians.

Within such a milieu, a dissonant voice is that of H. Wölfflin. In his essay *How One Should Photograph Sculpture?* (1896), Wölfflin emphasises the potential of photographic reproduction and, in particular, questions how it is possible to construct a photographic document that betrays the original work of art as little as possible. In other words, he inquiries how it is possible to create a document that respects the formal law underlying sculpture, so as to generate correct interpretations of the work itself.

Whosoever is interested in the history of sculpture is at the greatest loss for good illustrations. Not that the publications [i.e., photographic prints] are missing – the things are offered for sale in all sizes and manners – but it seems to be the widely held opinion that sculptural artworks can be photographed from any side, and it is left totally to the discretion of the photographer at which angle to the figure to set up his machine. […] The public buys these photographs in good faith, [believing] that with a mechanically-made illustration nothing of the original could be lost; it does not know that an old figure has a particular main view, that one destroys its effectiveness when one takes away its main silhouette […]. It would thus not be superfluous once and for all to make it more widely understood how sculptural photographs should be made, and guide the viewer back to seeking out the view that corresponds with the artist's conception. It is not right [to say] that a sculptural monument can

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4 See Longhi (1830); Argan (1970); Spalletti (1979).
5 See Benjamin (1936); more recently, see Montani (1981).

be seen from all sides. Nowadays there are admittedly some sculptures that leave it so-to-speak undecided from where they wish to be seen, in that they present themselves completely from no single side, but rather allow the viewer to arrive at full clarity only through the sequence of all individual views (Wölfflin [2013]: 53).

The Swiss art historian examines the critical-interpretative contribution of the photo and explicitly poses the problem of improper interpretations generated by pictures that do not take the correct viewpoint from which to photograph sculptures. Therefore, he indicates the greatest constraint is the transition from three to two dimensions in the uniqueness of the viewpoint of the photographic lens.

If until Michelangelo the frontal vision had been the only one that respected the formal law underlying sculpture, from Michelangelo onwards, Wölfflin explains, it would be necessary, for each sculpture, to have a sequence of photos that restore the multiplicity of points of view, all equally and potentially «correct».

With Michelangelo there are innovations. They raise a host of questions for the researcher [...].The Giovannino is a figure to which one does wrong if one places it in front of a wall without making sure that it can be turned, and when one wants to publish it, one must take multiple photographs in order to do justice to it. It wants to be seen from various sides (Wölfflin [2013]: 56).

In his essay, Wölfflin quotes Hildebrand's theory, particularly the chapter *The Conception of Relief* in *The Problem of Form* (1893). Hildebrand's example about the way to transpose the depth on the surface is interesting in terms of the encounter between photograph and sculpture:

To make this manner of presentation quite clear [the idea of depth], think of two panes of glass standing parallel, and between them a figure whose position is such that its outer points touch them. The figure then occupies a space of uniform depth measurement and its members are all arranged within this depth. When the figure, now, is seen from the front through the

glass, it becomes unified into a unitary pictorial surface, and, furthermore, the perception of its volume, of itself quite a complicated perception, is now made uncommonly easy [...]. Each form tends to make of itself a flat picture within the visible two dimensions of this layer, and to be understood as such a flat picture (Hildebrand [1907]: 80).

For Hildebrand an optical device, similar to the photographic process, such as two panes of glass, can facilitate the perception of the volume on a surface.

About half a century after Wölfflin's reflections, the epistemological value of the photograph clearly emerges from Malraux's work. The cognitive capacity of photography, as a function of a history of style, is mainly recognised in two operations: comparison between spatially and temporally distant artworks; and transformation of the dimensions of each of them. For Malraux, the history of art is the history of what can be photographed; further, it is thanks to photographs that hitherto obscure affinities between works are highlighted:

Thus the angle from which a work of sculpture is photographed, the focussing and, above all, skilfully adjusted lighting may strongly accentuate something merely the sculpture hinted at. Then, again, photography imparts a family likeness to objects that have actually but slight affinity. Whit the result that such different objects as a miniature, a piece of tapestry, a statue and a medieval stained-glass window, when reproduced on the same page, may seem member of the same family. They have lost their colours, texture and relative dimensions (the statue has also lost something of its volume); each, in short, has practically lost what was specific to it – but their common style is by so much the gainer.
There is another, more insidious, effect of reproduction. In an album or art book the illustrations tend to be of much the same size. Thus works of art lose their relative proportions (Malraux [1974]: 21).

As a comment on Malraux's reflection what H. Zerner states is interesting:

Sculpture needs mediation; it profits particularly from photography, not because this medium is more faith-

ful to sculpture but, on the contrary, because photog-
raphy acts more forcefully upon objects that demand
to have a point of view imposed on them. In fact, the
photographic reproduction returns sculpture to the
two-dimensional space that is the realm of "our art",
that is, not only the art of painting but also of photog-
raphy and of film with its succession of frames (Zern-
er [1998]: 123).

Malraux reverses the paradigm that had distinguished the viewpoint on the photograph, letting the strong interpretive power of the documentary photography of art clearly emerge (see also Didi-Huberman [2013]). The documentary photo can indeed highlight some stylistic components of the work, fulfilling an aesthetic operation. Therefore, the distinction between documentary and art photograph takes on nuanced outlines, so such distinction seems to depend mainly on reception and on the ex post evaluation that these images receive[6].

At the beginning of the twentieth century the aesthetic value of sculpture photographs was highlighted by many artists, such as Brancusi, Rosso, Gabo and Moholy-Nagy. In 1937, Giedion-Wielcker wrote *Moderne Plastik*, a history of sculpture as a photo book, where the prints suggested connections between sculptures and objects in the world. Giedion-Wielcker studied with Wölfflin in Munich and in her book she pushed his example (see Hamill and Luke [2017]: 11-18).

The relationship between sculpture and photography does not simply distinguish the beginning of the twentieth century but constitutes a line of research that runs through many artists' work up to the present day; in this regard, see the catalogue *The Original Copy* of the exhibition held at MoMA in 2010.

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[6] An interesting essay about the interpretive value of the documentary photo is that of Messina (2014) on the documentary photo of black sculpture in the 1910s. Messina shows how photography through the frontalisation and the monumentalisation realises a process of aestheticisation of these works; the photograph also allows these artifacts to be included in the art circuit and therefore to sanction them as works of art.

Below we will focus on Rosso's photos, often published in art magazines. From these prints emerges the complexity of the distinction between documentary and art photos. Even though their function is apparently documentary, we will see how they do not simply allow the recognition of the sculpture in question. The photos are new aesthetic objects with their own autonomy reflecting some of the stylistic features of the sculptures, but the function is not the simple identification of the sculpture itself.

4. SCULPTURAL AND PHOTOGRAPHIC REPLICAS

Rosso's work is important for reflection on the epistemological value of the photograph because his shots focus on some theoretical problems of photography, such as: reproducibility; the relationship between original and copy; the creative difference produced by variation in a series. We will therefore isolate a few images to show how a reflection on the status of the image is developed through them. Moreover, as we said above, the problematic distinction between documentary and art photography emerges through Rosso's works.

The inquiry conducted by Edmond Claris, *De l'Impressionnisme en Sculpture* (1902), highlights some interesting topics about Rosso's aesthetic. The art critic asked the most famous sculptors at the time to take a position on what was written by Baudelaire in 1846. The aesthetic problem focused by Baudelaire in "Why the Sculpture is Tiresome" is also indicated by Claris as one of the most important that the nineteenth century has given us.

Rosso, responding to Claris, makes a dialogue between Baudelaire's proposal and his own aesthetic, claiming that he was right to qualify sculpture as a lower art, since sculptors materialise an isolated element in space, when each object is part of a whole, primarily the environment that includes it. He exemplifies this idea by saying that when he does a portrait he does not limit it to the lines of the head, since it belongs to a body, which

is in an environment that the sculptor cannot eliminate; it is part of a whole that the artist cannot suppress.

Throughout his career he produces sculptures that seek to assimilate the surrounding environment. Then, in the last years his works are distinguished by being much closer to a bas-relief than a full-relief sculpture; it is significant that in some sculptures, such as the *Grande Rieuse*, on show at the Palazzo Pitti, around the part that frames the work there are holes to allow it to be hung on a wall.

Through his photos Rosso pushes to extremes some features present in his sculptures, which are conceived to be seen from a single viewpoint. Regarding what has been said above, that is, the aesthetic "restrictions" in the photographic transposition of sculpture, we will see how what is potentially a limitation is transformed by Rosso into a creative resource through which he comments on his sculptures.

Rosso began to photograph his sculptures because he was not satisfied with the photos taken by professional operators: sometimes he photographed pictures published in magazines or re-photographed his prints.

As highlighted by Bacci, since 1906 Rosso worked mainly on replicas, both photos and sculptures:

The intensification of the work on replicas, which can be firmly placed post-1906, involved both field of sculpture and photography. Just as the sculptural replicas were casts of an original, so the photographic replicas were photographs of an original print. The gradual reduction of the time devoted to the creation of news subjects left a gap in Ross's days, which was filled by the increased interest in his new field of experimentation, photography. […]. The production of sculptural replicas proceeded parallel to the creation of Rosso's photographic prints, in which the modus operandi was based on a formula of variation within repetition (Bacci [2004]: 25).

A prints series of *La Portinaia* («The concierge») is particularly interesting in respect to the relationship between original and copy. The series

for *La Portinaia* is extensive: about 20 copies of this subject are obtained from the same shot. I have selected a short number of prints, in which the variation within repetition is significant (figs. 1-6).

We do not know the chronological order of these prints, nor whether Rosso imagined a sequence for the images[7].

In the transition from the first to the second image, in addition to a progressive loss of the contours of the figure (fig. 2), the most important transformation is achieved thanks to a detailing operation – the cutting of the print by the artist. The irregular, oblique contour on the right side, in fact, contributes to transposing into photography the inclination of the head of the female figure as in the sculpture. Therefore, the oblique outline of the print assumes a figurative trait of the work of origin.

From fig. 3 to 6, in addition to an important colour variation, there is a progressive loss of identification of the contours of the figure. This tends to dissolve on the image plane, diluting the depth until a "drawing effect" is obtained (Bacci [2006]: 225–226).

The subtraction of figurative sharpness therefore seems to have a creative purpose: a photograph that imitates a drawing, evaporating on the surface. The process is very complex: from sculpture to photo to drawing. The effects obtained, moreover, are achieved thanks to a progression in the series: Rosso, with his photographs, enhances the importance of the identical, of the small variation.

The relationship between repetition and variation has affected the history of Western thought, and in connection with the temporal principle as well as with regard to artistic production has been effectively discussed by Kubler:

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[7] There is not an established catalogue of Rosso's photos, so the chronology of the prints is in some cases given only by the scholars who have dealt with them. See Mola (2006; 2007); Mola and Vitucci (2009). For this reason, information on individual photographs is uneven (as reflected in the related captions).

Fig. 1. *La Portinaia*, ca. 1910-14.

Fig. 2. *La Portinaia*, ca. 1910-14, platinum print, photograph of a photo, 17,9 x 9,6 cm.

Our actual perception of time depends upon regularly recurrent events, unlike our awareness of history, which depends upon unforeseeable change and variety. Without change there is no history; without regularity there is no time. Time and history are related as rule and variation: time is the regular setting for the vagaries of history. The replica and the invention are related in the same way: a series of true inventions excluding

all intervening replicas would approach chaos, and an all-embracing infinity of replicas without variation would approach formlessness. The replica relates to regularity and to time; the invention relates to variation and to history (Kubler [1962]: 71-72).

Replication and invention are central to the case in question because the sculpture provides,

Figg. 3-6. *La Portinaia*, ante 1914, gelatine silver bromine print whit tone, enlarged photos reproduction.

as its constitutive principle, the possibility of being able to produce, from the original cast, a series of identical works.

Rosso, with his photographs, establishes a regular frame through the repetition of the similar and, within this recurrence, he makes little variations so as to insinuate the creativity within the identical. In particular, Rosso's *modus operandi* is extremely original, as he achieves what Settis ([2015]: 69) calls «the seriation of the similar», which may include tiny variants, where creativity can take shape. Therefore, it is not a question of deconstructing originality through repetition of the identical, which is realised, according to Krauss (1985), in multiple media as sculpture; in the case of Rosso, the originals are plural, as we intend to argue.

This series poses a question of some importance for the epistemology of the arts, namely the relationship between repetition and innovation and the possibility that innovation can appear in the minimum dissimilarity between works. Moreover, the technical reproducibility of the work is questioned by a practice that is reproducible by definition: photography.

Rosso's photos underline, paradoxically, the dialectic tension that exists between the value of reproducibility of the new optical medium and that of the authenticity of the works. The dialectical tension is underlined by W. Benjamin:

The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity […]. The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it. Since the historical testimony is founded on the physical duration, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction, in which the physical duration plays no part. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition. One might focus these aspects of the artwork in the concept of the aura, and go on to say: what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura. This process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond the realm of art. It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence (Benjamin [1936]: 21-22).

Each print bears traits of originality, each time revisiting the original negative. Thus, Rosso's work produces original and authentic copies. The production of a plurality of originals, through a reproducible medium, investigates the value of authenticity of what is produced, questioning the reproducibility value of photography.

Goodman's formulations (1968) help us to focus on Rosso's creations. According to the philosopher, photography is like an etching in having two stages and in being multiple in its second stage. In other words, photography is an autographic art only in its first stage (the photographic plate, with its uniqueness of viewpoint, framing, etc.); it is multiple at the second stage (the numerous possible prints that can be made from the same negative).

The peculiarity of the work of the sculptor consists in making the second stage autographic too, with each print different from the next. In this way, he brings into question the uniqueness of the original, engendering a series of originals, which are never identical to one another. Therefore, Rosso's work invites us to reflect on the status of photography, on its epistemological purpose. The artist suggests a peculiar grammar of photography by virtue of his relationship with another art: sculpture. A relationship that partially rewrites some features of the first, in which the multiple value of the prints is transformed into an autographic one.

This aspect, in which the uniqueness of the original is affected by a plurality of originals, all different, concerns not only the series of *La Portinaia*, but also other series, such as that dedicated to *Ecce Puer* (a selection is given in figs. 7–10). This latter concerns a reflection on photography not only with reference to the question of the reproducibility of the medium, but also in terms of the status of the image.

In the *Ecce Puer* series, Rosso makes enlargements, cuts into the format, photographs photos and moves the photographic plate so as to obtain a blurred effect, veiling the surface of the image. These are photos that refer to one of the theoretical problems that have deeply marked the history of modern representation: the *veil* of the image. The veil was

Fig. 7. *Ecce Puer*, ca. 1906, modern print in contact with original negative, 10,5 x 8,5 cm.

theorised by Leon Battista Alberti (*De Pictura*, Book II) as a condition of the possibility of vision and then repeatedly represented by Dürer. This is a veil that is not a limitation of representation, but makes it possible, allows painting to become a window on the world, mimicking its features.

These photographs, as highlighted by Bertelli, eliminate «the cage of the format, which is precisely a perspective box, the window that Leon Battista Alberti posed as the premise of correct representation» (Bertelli [2004]: 36; my translation).

Through the blur, the cutting of the print, the framing, the zooming, and so on, the format of the image is shifted. Rosso modifies the principles of vision that regulate the modern representation, because he is aware that the camera's optics is based on those same assumptions.

In the *Ecce Puer* series, the artist shows what should be hidden, what should be transparent to

Fig. 8. *Ecce Puer*, 1910, *Vita d'Arte*, negative moved during printing.

make representation possible: the veil of image.

In the diversity of outcomes, a continuity between all the images in the series is that they have nuanced outlines, so much so that they are indistinguishable from the background. They are veiled figures, the result of a *concealment* or an *unveiling*[8].

We will examine in particular the first two, figs. 7 and 8, because the former is a photo that differs from the others because of the type of framing and the latter, although is taken from a different viewpoint, is a close-up of the first (confirming the continuity between the two curtains on the right).

Fig. 7 gives an effect of greater objectification, and the use of light is meaningful: the strong

contrast between light and shadow contributes to the effect of veiling the image, as it partially cancels some figurative traits. The light therefore does not disclose but conceals; it allows a few figurative traits to emerge, with an effect of homogenising the face.

In fig. 8, the whole left part of the image is reabsorbed from the bottom; the contours of the face become fluid – they are no longer visible on the left and become progressively uncertain on the right. The veiling effect is maximised by the negative, which was moved during the printing phase.

A process of partial concealment is recognisable if we compare the two prints: the loss of some traits visible in the first picture corresponds to a close-up on the face. This process can be interpreted as greater evidence of the veil, which interposes itself between the beholder and the observed object.

On the other hand, if we consider the second print not as a transformation of the former, but consider it singularly, it is not possible to indicate a process of concealment. The effect, on the contrary, is that of an unveiling: the figure emerges from an indistinct background. It is a picture that tells us about the image and its coming to light.

This picture expresses the photographic process in its development, in which visual traits gradually emerge in contact with light. It is a picture that focuses on the photographic process in its making, highlighting photography as a theoretical process that can be expressed on the surface of the print. In this regard, the title *Ecce Puer* is particularly meaningful, suggesting a sort of epiphany of vision.

Rosso's photos, as fig. 8 shows well, are complex aesthetic objects, not a simple reference to the sculpture of origin. They suggest an interesting path of the gaze; they dialogue with the history of painting and qualify sculpture and photography respectively. These photographs lead to extreme outcomes in Rosso's aesthetics, according to which the sculptures had to dissolve in the surrounding environment; at the same time, they offer an interesting viewpoint on photography, as an art that shapes objects and is not simply its imprint.

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[8] About the *concealment* and *unveiling* effects on the representation, see Lancioni (2013); Corrain (2016); Leone, Riedmatten, Stoichita (2016).
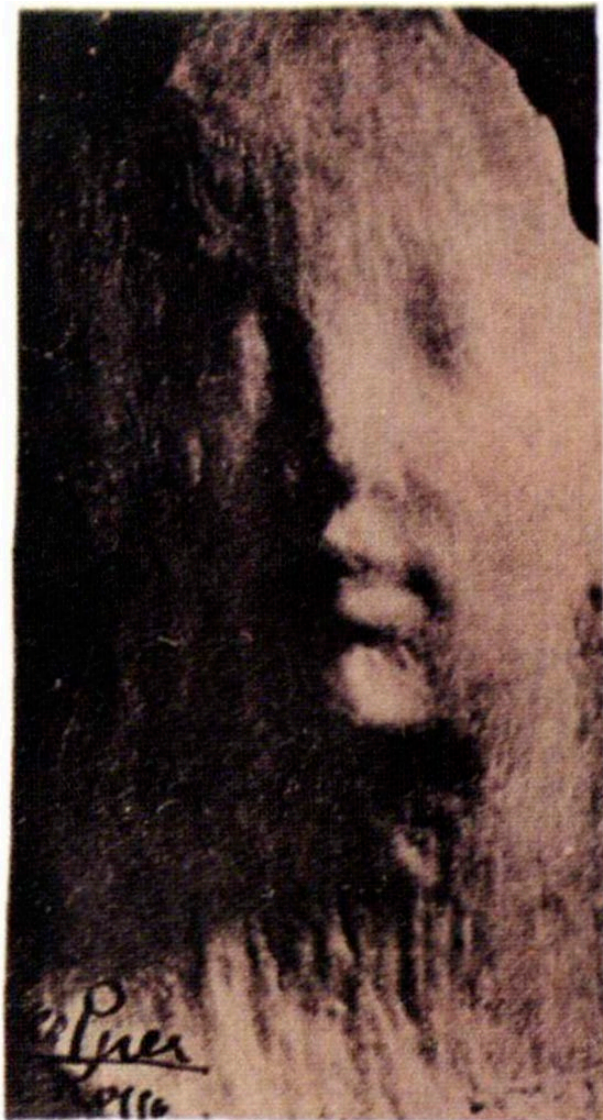
Fig. 9-10. *Ecce Puer*, ca. 1906.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The photographs of Rosso have highlighted some theoretical aspects of the photographic medium, particularly concerning the relationship between sculpture and photography. The hypothesis that has guided the research is that the single image can convey a theoretical reflection on the status of the medium, in this case photography.

Although we do not intend to universalise the results obtained, the case under analysis however, has led to interesting considerations on the quali-

ties of photography by virtue of its encounter with sculpture.

In particular, some features that mark the relationship between documentary and art photos have been focused on; this is a distinction that the photographs of the Milanese sculptor make uncertain. *Ecce Puer* (fig. 8) is used by the author, paradoxically, as a documentary photo; it was published in 1910 in the magazine *Vita d'Arte* with title «L'enfant» and then in 1913 in *Comœdia* as «Impression d'Enfant», then receiving its current title. It is a documentary photo that, how-

ever, as we have seen, has had a considerable aesthetic impact, having theoretical features that have marked the history of modern representation and that of photography.

Moreover, the work of Rosso seems to undermine the value of reproducibility of photography and sculpture together, and their potential for creating a multiplicity of originals.

If photography and sculpture, starting from a single plate or cast, can produce identical copies in their second stage (Goodman [1968]), Rosso's prints fracture this functioning. A plurality of originals is produced through a reproducible medium, photography; in this way, a quality of the photographic process and of the sculptural one is undermined.

As we have argued, a reflection on the relationship between photography and sculpture seems to be able to highlight some qualities peculiar to photography, such as reproducibility, the relationship between an original and its copies, the necessary presence of a unique viewpoint, and the possibility of focusing the photographic process in its making.

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