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## Brancusi and His Poets

### Abstract

This article examines four poems on the work of the modern sculptor Constantin Brancusi, written between 1922 and 1966 by four different poets: Carl Sandburg, Mina Loy, Jean (Hans) Arp, and Jiri Kolar. The purpose of the article is to explore how the varying poetics of these writers—the modernism of the Chicago Renaissance, Futurism, Dadaism, and Concrete poetry—influenced the poets' reception and interpretation of the sculptor and his work. This study approaches the relations between visual and verbal art through a semiotic methodology, and while the discussion of the poems takes the form of comparative literature, the main concern of the essay is a *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of Brancusi's work. This reception has had a direct influence on twentieth-century literature due to the importance of visual art theories and programs for the poetry of the time. Brancusi's work serves as a constant and as a tool with which to examine and articulate the differences between these four important literary movements.

### Keywords

poem, modern, sculptor, Constantin Brancusi, Carl Sandburg, Mina Loy, Jean (Hans) Arp, Jiri Kolar, modernism, Chicago Renaissance, Futurism, Dadaism, Concrete poetry, sculptor, visual, verbal, semiotic methodology, comparative literature, Rezeptionsgeschichte, twentieth-century, literature, visual art theories

## BRANCUSI AND HIS POETS

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The comparison of visual and verbal art seems to have moved away from founding itself on the concept of *Zeitgeist* as a *tertium comparationis* to relate two works in different media.<sup>1</sup> Recent studies have been more specific, comparing one poet with one painter,<sup>2</sup> or locating the esthetics of a poet in a particular visual arts movement.<sup>3</sup> The most interesting results to date, I believe, have come from the attempt to define semiotically the means of correspondence between a visual work and a text explicitly based on it.<sup>4</sup> However, this increasing rigor and delineation have made it unpopular to compare works by different poets based on the same artifact or artist.

Yet such a comparative study affords some unique perspectives. What follows is an examination of four poems written about the sculptor Constantin Brancusi and his work. The poets under consideration are Carl Sandburg, Mina Loy, Jean (Hans) Arp, and Jiří Kolář. Such a group provides fascinating contrasts: an American, an Englishwoman, a Frenchman, and a Czech; the popular biographer of Lincoln, a feminist heavily influenced by Italian Futurism, one of the founders of Dada, and a concrete poet.

The study of these poets and their poems is also the study of the reception and concretization of Brancusi's work, a sort of *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. It reveals how Brancusi's work was appropriated by different esthetic systems, and illuminates the different interpretations of his work thus refracted.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there are the differing methods these four poets have employed in their attempts to transform a plastic *oeuvre* into a verbal analogy.

I

Perhaps surprisingly, there were very close connections between Carl Sandburg and Brancusi. The most important of these was Edward Steichen, Sandburg's brother-in-law, who was mentioned by the poet as one of the great influences in his life.<sup>6</sup> Steichen was one of the major American photographers of the early twentieth century. He was also a friend of Brancusi's. Immediately after Brancusi's first group show in the Armory in 1913 Steichen bought the sculptor's *Maiastra* (now in the Tate Gallery) and installed Brancusi's first one-man show at the Gallery of the Photo-Secession in New York in 1914. In 1920 Brancusi carved an *Endless Column* for Steichen's garden in Voulangis, near Paris. Throughout this period and later, Steichen photographed both Brancusi and his work.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, we can be certain that Sandburg was familiar with Brancusi and his work from a fairly early date. Although Sandburg seems to have been acquainted with several artists of his time, there is little indication that he had any detailed knowledge of their media. The references to art in his poems are infrequent and often trite (e.g., "She is thinking about somebody and something the same as Whistler's mother sat and thought about somebody and something"<sup>8</sup> or "Who saw the night / fold its Mona Lisa hands / and sit half-smiling, half-sad" (*CP*, p. 261). Although Sandburg uses a poet-as-painter metaphor at times in his letters,<sup>9</sup> the only comparison that seems more than casual is when he likens his work to photographs: "I would rather have a good photograph, that had not been monkeyed with, that had clear, definite lines, than an interpretive painting by anyone. And I would rather make the good photograph in words . . ." <sup>10</sup> Sandburg's technique can indeed be seen as an amassing of photographic detail, rarely with any explicit comment on what he has presented. With this background, let us turn to the poem:

*Brancusi*

Brancusi is a galoot; he saves tickets to take him nowhere; a galoot with his baggage ready and no time table; ah yes, Brancusi is a galoot; he understands birds and skulls so well, he knows the hang of the coils and plaits on a woman's head, he knows them so far back he knows where they came from and where they are

going; he is fathoming down for the secrets of the first and the oldest makers of shapes.

Let us speak with loose mouths to-day not at all about Brancusi because he has hardly started nor is hardly able to say the name of the place he wants to go when he has time and is ready to start; O Brancusi, keeping hardwood planks around your doorsteps in the sun waiting for the hardwood to be harder for your hard hands to handle, you Brancusi with your chisels and hammers, birds going to cones, skulls going to eggs—how the hope hugs your heart you will find one cone, one egg, so hard when the earth turns mist there among the last will be a cone, an egg.

Brancusi you will not put a want ad in the papers telling God it will be to His advantage to come around and see you; you will not grow gabby and spill God earfuls of prayers; you will not get fresh and familiar as if God is a next-door neighbor and you have counted His shirts on a clothes line; you will go on stammering, stuttering and mumbling or you will be silent as a mouse in a church garret when the pipe organ is pouring ocean waves on the sunlit rocks of ocean shores; if God is saving a corner for any battling bag of bones, there will be one for you, there will be one for you, Brancusi. (*CP*, p. 301)

There can, of course, be no question here of Sandburg's attempting some sort of photo-in-words, for the "commentary" and the tone of the speaker are the dominant and most striking elements of the poem.

But before discussing the all-important tone, we must first consider the genre of the poem, for it is not exactly a poem, but rather a prose-poem. Although not the sole instance of this genre in Sandburg's *oeuvre*, it is nonetheless unusual. Sandburg used the same form in "Four Steichen Prints," and he ends the poem "Gypsy Mother" in prose, the same point at which he introduces the "Whistler's mother" simile. Many modern critics of Sandburg are unwilling to call these works "poetry."<sup>11</sup> And many of Sandburg's contemporaries were unwilling to call Brancusi's work "art." Thus the choice of a problematic form may suggest the actual debate that surrounded Brancusi's work. One might object, however, that the poetic value of Sandburg's *vers libre* was already quite contested as it was. One must recall, though, that poets in the first quarter of the

century often held up *prose* as a model of good writing, as a goal for poetry to achieve. Ezra Pound wrote to Harriet Monroe: "Poetry must be *as well written as prose*. . . . It must be as simple as De Maupassant's best prose, and as hard as Stendhal's."<sup>12</sup> At the banquet for William Butler Yeats at the Cliffdwellers Club in Chicago (sponsored by Monroe), which Sandburg attended, the guest of honor spoke of "poetry that is naturally simple, that might exist in the simplest prose."<sup>13</sup> Crowder suggests that "the remarks . . . must have found sympathetic response in the heart of the newly recognized Midwest poet" (p. 45). The belief that prose represented economy and "hardness" may again have motivated Sandburg's choice of form when writing of Brancusi. This observation is strengthened by observing the way Sandburg in this piece frequently omits conjunctions and prepositions (e.g., "how the hope hugs your heart [that] you will find one cone, one egg, so hard [that] when the earth turns [to] mist . . .").

However, the other piece of Sandburg's writing that "Brancusi" most resembles is not a poem at all, but rather the review of Rodin's *Art* in his column "Books the Newspaperman Ought to Read."<sup>14</sup> It starts:

Because there are lavender fools who lift their eyebrows so-so when they mention the word "art," it has lost the meaning it might otherwise have. The theory is: "If art is what this gazink says it is, then good-night to art for me."

The review goes on to insist on the art inherent in women's gossip and the useless motions of a bricklayer. It concludes with a suggestion of why Rodin's book is one "the newspaperman ought to read":

Take Rodin's book, "Art." Look over the photos of the things he did in stone. Read his comment. Find out whether he shoots a new sea-mist light of wisdom through the skyline where for us newspapermen the silhouetted human procession goes by.

In many ways, the review is the pendant to "Brancusi," for in the poem too what Sandburg actually presents us with at the beginning is a quotation: "Brancusi is a galoot." The use of slang here carries the opposite meaning that "gazink" does in the review, and it is to this criticism of Brancusi that the poetic persona addresses himself: "ah

yes, Brancusi *is* a galoot,” that is, if you think a galoot is someone who “understands birds and skulls so well.”

In the second paragraph the poet says: “Let us speak with loose mouths to-day not at all about Brancusi.” The implication of the word order is that the ignorant must speak of *someone* “with loose mouths”; however, their choice should not fall on Brancusi. The reason given is an interesting one: “because he has hardly started nor is hardly able to say the name of the place he wants to go.” Sandburg feels that the people can say whatever they want about an artist once he is dead, but should reserve judgement on the living. We see this attitude most clearly in his piece “Grieg Being Dead”:

GRIEG being dead we may speak of him and his art.  
 Grieg being dead we can talk about whether he was any good or not.  
 Grieg being with Ibsen, Bjornsen, Lief Ericson and the rest,  
 Grieg being dead does not care a hell’s hoot what we say.  
(CP, p. 227)

Sandburg’s reason is followed by an apostrophe addressed to the sculptor himself. There are parts of the Brancusi myth that no doubt appealed to the poet. Both came from simple origins and spent much of their early lives at odd jobs. A long-time Populist and labor-organizer, Sandburg must have been attracted to Brancusi’s peasant image. This is apparent in the beginning of his direct address: “O Brancusi, keeping hardwood planks around your door steps in the sun waiting for the hardwood to be harder for your hard hands to handle, you Brancusi, with your chisels and hammers.” The emphasis on the woodworker rather than the sculptor is apparent. It seems that the poet, who was still struggling for acceptance and whose work was causing a furor over its style and diction, was identifying with the artist much more than he was analyzing his works.

However, although he does not name any work specifically, we can get a fair idea of the particular pieces of Brancusi that Sandburg had in mind: obviously the *Endless Column* made for his brother-in-law, the *Bird in Space* (though to refer to it as a “cone” seems particularly unperceptive), *Mlle Pogany*, and the *Beginning of the World*. The reference to “skulls” again seems inappropriate. Sandburg, however, had his own reasons for seeing these signs of decay in Brancusi’s work. Evanesence, death, and the eventual

extinction of great civilizations are all common themes in Sandburg's work.<sup>15</sup> Yet an artist tends to think in terms of permanence, especially a sculptor. Sandburg recognizes Brancusi's search for essential forms: "How the hope hugs your heart you will find one cone, one egg, so hard when the earth turns mist there among the last to go will be a cone, an egg" (note the mist imagery also used in the review). Sandburg here has completely reversed the sculptor's work: the piece *Beginning of the World* is taken not as the first form of creation, but rather as the most stable and *last* form in the midst of cosmic dissolution. The verb "hug" may be a reference to *The Kiss*, but the connotations of "heart" lead us to another poem, "Beat, Old Heart," which concerns itself with humanity's necessary struggle against death and natural transience. More particular, though, for the poet's identification with Brancusi, is the hostility they both experienced at the hands of the public, manifest in "At the Gates of Tombs":

CIVILIZATIONS are set up and knocked down  
the same as pins in a bowling alley.

\* \* \*

It is the law; as a civilization dies and goes down  
to eat ashes along with all other dead civilizations  
—it is the law all dirty wild dreamers die first—  
gag 'em, lock 'em up, get 'em bumped off.

And since at the gates of tombs silence is a gift,  
be silent about it, yes, be silent—forget it.

(CP, pp. 292-94)

In both this poem and "Brancusi" we hear an ironic tone in the reported mocking of artists, and in both we are given Sandburg's characteristic response: silence. As a matter of fact, the image of poetry as a silent statue with its mouth open appears in 1915 in the poem "Gypsy" and bears a striking resemblance to the *Maiastira* that Steichen had bought only two years earlier (PLATE 1), placed on top of one of Brancusi's "obelisks," its neck stretched out and its beak wide open:

I asked a gypsy pal  
 To imitate an old image  
 And speak old wisdom.  
 She drew in her chin,  
 Made her neck and head  
 The top piece of a Nile obelisk and said  
 Snatch off the gag from thy mouth, child,  
 And be free to keep silence.  
 Tell no man anything for no man listens,  
 Yet hold thy lips ready to speak.

(CP, p.76)

Brancusi exemplifies for Sandburg both this sense of silence and man's struggle; he "will not grow gabby and spill God earfuls of prayer; . . . you will go on stammering, stuttering and mumbling or you will be silent." Sandburg ends the poem by a return to a sort of reported vernacular, but with a twist: Brancusi is no *rattling* bag of bones but a "battling" one.



I. *MAIASTRA* in the Garden of Edward Steichen, c. 1913, coll. E. Steichen; rpt. Spear, p. 57.

II

Mina Loy's poem, "Brancusi's Golden Bird," was published the same year as Sandburg's, 1922. Her writing was heavily influenced by the Italian Futurists,<sup>16</sup> and although there are some elements common to both Loy's and Sandburg's treatments, it is their differences that are most apparent.

Recent discussions of Brancusi have all but ignored the similarity between certain of his works, most especially *Bird in Space*, and contemporary movements that were more obviously inspired by machine imagery, for instance, the Futurists, the Vorticists, Léger and Delaunay, and the later Purism movement. Indeed, the famous 1926-1928 U.S. Customs trial about Brancusi's *Golden Bird* centered precisely on the question of whether the piece was a work of art or simply "a piece of metal."<sup>17</sup> Loy chooses this particular statue and inserts it into a Futurist esthetics:

*Brancusi's Golden Bird*

The toy  
become the aesthetic archetype  
As if  
    some patient peasant God  
    had rubbed and rubbed  
    the Alpha and Omega  
    of Form  
    into a lump of metal  
A naked orientation  
unwinged unplumed  
—the ultimate rhythm  
has lopped the extremities  
from  
the nucleus of flight  
The absolute act  
of art  
conformed  
to continent sculpture  
—bare as the brow of Osiris—  
this breast of revelation

an incandescent curve  
licked by chromatic flames  
in labyrinths of reflections

This gong  
of polished hyper aesthesia  
shrills with brass  
as the aggressive light  
strikes  
its significance

The immaculate  
conception  
of the inaudible bird  
occurs  
in gorgeous reticence— — —<sup>18</sup>

To what extent does Loy follow either the Futurist prescriptions of Marinetti or the Imagist/Vorticist warnings of Pound? Marinetti's "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature" (1920) demands the frequent use of infinitives, the abolition of adjectives, adverbs, and the "I," and suggests the use of constant chains of analogies (quoted by Kouidis, pp. 56-57). The only two of these techniques evident in Loy's poem are the impersonal tone and the chain of analogies, which are marked off by the indentation from "As if," followed by two separate similes. Nonetheless, particular lines of her poem bear a marked resemblance to the titles the Futurists chose for their visual art, such as Boccioni's *I Want to Synthesize the Unique Form of Continuity in Space*.<sup>19</sup> Loy's violation of the Imagist rules is even more complete, for where Pound warns to "go in fear of abstraction" (quoted by Jones, p. 131), Loy relishes it. Her attention to what Kouidis calls "exotic, scientific and polysyllabic words" shows her clear debt to the decadent poetry of Laforgue (Kouidis, p. 106). Pound, in 1918, identified Loy's style as "logopoeia or poetry that is akin to nothing but language, which is a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas and modification of ideas and characters."<sup>20</sup>

And indeed, the first eight lines of this poem bristle with allusions. For instance, "toy" seems a strange first image to offer of Brancusi's work, for it is neither a definition he would have been likely to use, nor does one usually think of a sculpture four feet high as a

“toy.”<sup>21</sup> It is, however, precisely the title of another work in bronze by the Vorticist Gaudier-Brzeska (PLATE II). Loy could have learned of this piece through a variety of channels: from Marinetti after his visits to England, or from Pound’s memoir of the sculptor, published in 1916.<sup>22</sup> Kouidis suggests that the words “As if” are a reference to H. Vaihinger’s *The Philosophy of “As If.”*<sup>23</sup> And the image of the artist instilling universals into a “lump” of gold is perhaps a reversal of Baudelaire’s lines: “Tu m’as donné ta boue et j’en ai fait de l’or.”<sup>24</sup>

Of course, there are also echoes from the other poems in Loy’s first major collection, *Lunar Baedeker*. In “Apology of Genius,” which appeared beside “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” in *Dial*, we are presented with an image of the artist-as-blacksmith:

In the raw caverns of the Increate  
we forge the dusk of Chaos  
to that imperious jewelry of the Universe  
—the Beautiful—

(*LB*, pp. 4-5)

Thus, the blacksmith image has an application broader than simply to Brancusi, and as Kouidis says, “paraphrases the art-for-art’s-sake aesthetics” (p. 113).

Before looking more closely at Loy’s imagery, however, we should conclude our discussion of her technique. Although she by and large ignores Futurist and Imagist methods, her poetic techniques are clearly modernist. To what extent are any of these techniques analogous to Brancusi’s sculptural technique in *Bird in Space*? Kouidis, following Pound’s identification of Loy’s work as logopoeia, argues:

The structural and temporal experiments that shape the movement of the consciousness in Mina Loy’s poetry draw the reader’s attention to the single word as meaning, shape, and sound. The word—in isolation, in unlikely conjunctions, or intertwined in glittering patterns of sound—is the sinew of her technical experiments and the pulse of her metaphysics and aesthetics. (p. 87)

I cannot find such an analysis wholly convincing. Although perhaps a forerunner, Loy’s poetry does not achieve the opacity of the verbal



II. H. Gaudier-Brzeska, *Brass Toy* (1914), Musees nationaux de France; rpt. Wees, plate 19.

signifier found, for instance, in concrete poetry, and she dwells far too much in the realm of metaphysical abstractions for such opacity to become truly dominant. Nonetheless, in “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” she attempts to create a verbal form analogous to the sculptor’s rigorous reduction of natural forms.

Loy makes heavy use of alliteration. This begins in the second line with “aesthetic architype [sic]” and continues in binary form through “patient peasant” and “rubbed and rubbed.” Kouidis notes that the “plosives of ‘patient peasant’ and the *b* cognate in the repeated ‘rubbed’ enact the craftman’s careful exertion, the patience and the tenacity, necessary to the creative act” (p. 122). We have seen a similar technique used by Sandburg in his repetition of /ha:/ and /hae/ in “hard,” “hands,” and “hammer.”

In the sixth line this alliteration is semantically mirrored in “the Alpha and Omega / of Form,” which also begins the tripartite alliterative form. That is, through line twenty-one alliteration between two terms in one line is immediately followed by a single third term in the next: “unwinged unplumed / —the ultimate rhythm,” “absolute act / of art,” “—bare as the brow of Osiris— / this breast.” With such form Loy imitates what she sees as the “lopped . . . extremities” of Brancusi’s work. This form dissolves into a more complicated pattern in the fifth stanza with the joining and separating of /k/, /s/, liquids, and the labiodental /f/, both voiced and unvoiced:

*an incandescent curve*

n nk n s tk rf

*licked by chromatic flames*

l k t b k r tk fl s

*in labyrinths of reflections*

n l b r n s fr fl k s

In the sixth stanza the tempo of the poem continues to speed up: the verbs now change from past participles and perfectives to the present tense; the alliteration continues with “polished hyper aesthesia [sic] / shrills” and the domination of the stanza by /s/ and the acute vowel /i/ contributes to a sense of light and movement. The structural closure of the poem rests mainly on the isolated last term of the /k/ alliteration turning into its voiced counterpart, /g/, in “gorgeous,” and the assonance of “bird / occurs.”

I have already mentioned the triadic form of “the Alpha and Omega / of Form.” It is mirrored in the next stanza: “of crest and claw / from”—this anagrammatic juggling suggests that “Form” is an abstracting “from.” Indeed, Loy emphasizes the abstract quality of Brancusi’s work, much more than it perhaps warrants.<sup>25</sup> In her unpublished work, “The Metaphysical Pattern in Aesthetics,” Loy writes that what distinguishes the modern artist is not his choice of subject, but rather his manipulation of the medium (quoted by Kouidis, p. 105). Hence we see Loy interpreting Brancusi’s work as essentially nonrepresentational. However, Brancusi actually seems to occupy a middle ground between mimetic and non-mimetic art. The sculpture of Tony Smith, for instance, is similar to a painting by Malevich, where the term “abstraction” refers to ideal forms such as squares or cubes. Jean Arp might exemplify “abstraction” in the sense of “nonrepresentational,” that is, claiming no resemblance to the natural world.<sup>26</sup> Brancusi’s works too are “abstractions,” but in the sense of a reduction of the natural objects they represent to their “essentials.”

While Loy draws attention to this last sense of the word “abstraction,” for the most part she ignores the representational basis of Brancusi’s work. However, the theme of flight remains strong in the poem. It is a theme that can be found throughout Loy’s work of this period, representing “orgasmic self-realization” and “psychic and sexual freedom” (Kouidis, pp. 26 and 70). In this sense, then, the tension between representation and nonrepresentation in Brancusi’s piece informs Loy’s poem, and this conflict between the formal and the thematic can be understood as similar to the position of Brancusi’s “abstraction” in the development of modern art.

### III

This position is perhaps brought into even greater relief by the poem on Brancusi by Jean (Hans) Arp:

#### *La Colonne Sans Fin*

Qui est cette belle?

C’est Mademoiselle Pogany, une parente de Lady Shub-ad, la belle

Sumérienne, et de Nefertiti.

Mademoiselle Pogany est la féerique grand'mère de la sculpture abstraite.

Elle est constituée de voûtes, de courbes, d'emboîtages nacrés, de coquillages purs.

Elle pond des lunes blanches par les yeux.

En quittant hier l'atelier de la colonne sans fin—le calendrier dirait qu'il y a environ trente-cinq ans—j'attrapai avec ma main un peu du ciel incandescent du soir.

Il grimaçait et rigolait de moi, mais je le dévorai.

C'était ma première et ma dernière visite chez Brancusi.

Ce sous-entendu est-il à comprendre?

Je n'expliquerai pas plus amplement pourquoi je ne suis pas retourné chez lui et ne dirai aujourd'hui que mon admiration profonde pour Brancusi.

Le jour tombait, mais l'espace autour d'un oiseau rêvait d'un éclair empenné et ne s'apercevait pas que l'oiseau s'était envolé et prenait le chemin vers l'atelier de la colonne sans fin.

Le coq chantait—co-co-ri-co—et chaque son faisait un zig ou un zag dans son cou.

Le coq de Brancusi est une scie de joie.

Ce coq scie le jour de l'arbre de la lumière.

Toutes ces sculptures sortent d'une fontaine humaine:

Le coq

Le phoque

Son portrait par lui-même: la colonne sans fin

Le poisson, roi-géant des silex nageant dans un nuage

Le fils prodigue qui monte l'escalier en descendant

Les pingouins qui pondent l'oeuf du nouveau-né.

Une fontaine raconte ces fables plastiques.<sup>27</sup>

Arp wrote this piece in 1955, two years before Brancusi's death. Temperamentally, there could not be a greater difference than that between Brancusi, who spent over thirty years perfecting the same form, and Arp, the Dadaist / Surrealist who believed in aleatoric art. As Nicolas Calas wrote:

. . . Arp's sculpture [is] the product of an attention that is used to

protect the free development of physiological movement from interruptions and that is why the forms and images thus created look, although they are purely imaginary, as if they were alive. They are *biomorphic* as opposed to the geometric forms Brancusi excels in using.<sup>28</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that Brancusi “grimaced and made fun” of the Dadaist.

Arp’s first concern in this poem is to situate Brancusi’s work historically. Like Loy, who spoke of “some patient peasant,” “the brow of Osiris,” and “This gong,” Arp too relates Brancusi’s work back to primitive Eastern art. This puts Brancusi in the context of such Vorticists as Gaudier-Brzeska and the Imagist use of what Pound called other forms of prosody, such as Japanese.<sup>29</sup> And Arp relates all this to the development of “la sculpture abstraite.” He insists, however, that the beginning of abstract sculpture is not with Brancusi, for a “fairy godmother” is posterior to birth. This again seems to highlight Brancusi’s distinctive place in the development of modern art.

Arp claims that his “first and last visit” to Brancusi was around 1920. Yet his poem shows great familiarity with the range of the sculptor’s work (*The Seal*, for instance was not conceived until 1936). And it is instructive to see the array of pieces Arp mentions and interrelates. “Elle est constituée de voûtes, de courbes, d’emboîtages nacrés, de coquillages purs” seems to refer to the latter versions of *Mlle Pogany*, such as the one of 1919, while the reference to her eyes which “pond des lunes blanches” would be more appropriate to earlier versions. While the first version of *The Cock* was executed in 1924, relating it to *The Endless Column* and referring to it as a “tree” brings to mind rather the monumental versions of 1924-41. On the other hand, *The Fish*, “roi-géant,” refers to the earlier forms of this work, which measured seventy-one inches in length, rather than to the smaller, later models which are better known today. And “Le fils prodigue qui monte en descendant” is a reference not only to the work by that name, but also to the sort of dual, escalator form of *The Endless Column*.

What is achieved by this, of course, is not just the demonstration of Arp’s familiarity with a fellow-sculptor’s work, but more importantly, it is the most successful manifestation of a tendency also discernible in Sandburg and Loy: that is, the relating and equating of

one piece with another at a variety of levels. We have seen this in Sandburg on an explicit level:

. . . he understands birds and skulls so well, he knows the hang of the hair of the coils and plaits on a woman's head, he knows them so far back he knows where they came from and where they are going . . . birds going to cones, skulls going to eggs—

(CP, p. 301)

Loy, on the other hand, creates her own analogies: “the brow of Osiris . . . this breast . . . chromatic flames” (LB, pp. 17-18). It is Arp's poem, however, that resembles most the interrelations of Brancusi's own work. He introduces few images that are not drawn from actual titles. He avails himself of the poetry inherent in the titles of the works. In the line “Les pingouins qui pondent l'oeuf du nouveau-né,” for instance, he connects *Three Penguins* to *Mlle Pogany* through the repetition of the verb *pondre*, then those two to the egg-shaped *Beginning of the World*, and that to *The New Born*. In other words, he replaces the iconic similarity between works with semantic motivation. The use of contiguity, rather than metaphor, through the simple listing of titles (“Le coq / Le phoque”) conveys a sense of sculptural self-referentiality, while at the same time resembling some of Brancusi's own arrangements, as witnessed in his studio photographs (PLATE III). However, Arp—especially near the conclusion—also employs the similarity of the verbal signifiers to insist further on the interrelations between the sculptural signifieds (“Le coq / Le phoque / Son portrait . . . / Le poisson, . . . / Le fils prodigue . . . / Les pingouins”).<sup>30</sup> In this fashion, he stresses the minimal importance of the signifieds of the sculptures, insisting on the greater importance of the resemblance of their forms. Brancusi's work seems to offer the viewer an entire history of metamorphosis, “fables plastiques,” wherein he can read how one form evolves into another.<sup>31</sup>



III. *Vue d'ensemble de l'atelier* (1923), ph. 36, Musées nationaux de France; rpt. *Brancusi, photographe*, ed. Marielle Tabart and Isabelle Monod-Fontaine (Paris: Centre George Pompidou, 1977), plate 32.

IV

The most recent poem on Brancusi was written by the Czech poet/artist and translator of Sandburg,<sup>32</sup> Jiří Kolář, in 1966 (PLATE IV). Unlike any other writer, Kolář has brought out the serial element of Brancusi's work. *Bird in Space* exists in over twenty slightly differing versions. Kolář represents this seriality by variations of a single element: "brancusi." Choosing this most belabored piece, he identifies it with Brancusi himself, as Arp chose *The Endless Column*. Starting with the complete name as the base, the repetitions seem to rise up and dissolve into the ether of white space around the form, in a way very similar to Kolář's earlier "Ephemeral poem." It is also similar to his "anticollages," where elements are systematically and serially removed from paintings, as in his *Veronese I-IV*. By cutting this form out of print, Kolář seems to cut the last link between the form and any real bird it represents, thus emphasizing rather the form's abstract expressionist quality.

Are we "supposed" to "read" this poem bottom-up, or top-down? The "concrete" mode defeats the temporality natural to language. This poem is, in this sense, unreadable, "silent," and thus uniquely manifests the theme of silence raised by both Sandburg and Loy.

There is another dimension added by the fact that this is a "concrete" poem on a three-dimensional work. Poems on the visual arts have historically concentrated on the two-dimensional medium of painting.<sup>33</sup> We can compare Kolář's piece with Ian Hamilton Finlay's "Homage to Malevich" (PLATE V). Kolář, by eschewing any linguistic motivation (which Finlay introduces by the graphemic similarity of "c," "o," and "b"), renders the verbal medium more "thing-like." Indeed, as a transference from sculptural three-dimensionality to a visual two-dimensional medium, Kolář's piece can be understood as playing on the very concept of "concrete" poetry. This is apparent in many other works by Kolář where print is used chiefly for its visual, rather than its linguistic qualities and is applied in a papier-mâché fashion to three-dimensional objects.

Mary Ellen Solt writes: "all definitions of concrete poetry can be reduced to the same formula: Form=content / content=form."<sup>34</sup> This phrase is, of course, very similar to Loy's definition of modernism quoted above. Indeed, both concrete poetry and abstract art can be



l a c k b l o c k b l a c k b  
l o c k b l a c k b l o c k b  
l a c k b l o c k b l a c k b  
l o c k b l a c k b l o c k b  
l a c k b l o c k b l a c k b  
l o c k b l a c k b l o c k b  
l a c k b l o c k b l a c k b  
l o c k b l a c k b l o c k b  
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l o c k b l a c k b l o c k b  
l a c k b l o c k b l a c k b  
l o c k b l a c k b l o c k b  
l a c k b l o c k b l a c k b

V. Ian Hamilton Finlay, "Homage to Malevich," rpt. Jean François Bory, *Once Again*, trans. Lee Hildreth (New York: New Directions 1968), p. 26.

said to base themselves on this same problem: "a problem of function-relations of . . . material."<sup>35</sup> Loy imitated Brancusi's *Bird in Space* through diagrammatic iconicity, her triadic structure representing the symmetry of Brancusi's attenuated form. According to C. S. Peirce, this is the second degree of iconicity.<sup>36</sup> Kolář, however, dispenses with syntax, even with morphology, and imitates Brancusi's work through an *image*, or "First Firstness." Such a step reveals the inherent contradiction of concrete poetry, for as it attempts to become more "thing-like," concrete poetry frequently tends towards greater iconicity, which insists on its function as a representing sign. Kolář's poem ends up being both far less "concrete" and far less "abstract" than Brancusi's bird.

## V

What, then, can we say of the reception of Brancusi's work by poets through the forty-five year period from 1922 to 1966? Clearly there has been an increasing attempt, perhaps common to all modernist poems based on the visual arts, to find closer analogies between the two media. The very attempt to create analogies is, of course, not a given in poetry of this sort. Wordsworth's typical poetic reaction to a painting was not so much to refer to the artifact itself as to the moral intention of the artist (see, for instance, "Elegiac Stanzas, suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, painted by Sir George Beaumont" or "To B. R. Haydon, on Seeing his Picture of Napoleon Buonaparte on the Island of St. Helena"). Or, we have the dramatic monologues in the voice of the painter himself by Browning, or the use of the depicted scene as a sort of theatrical setting, as is frequent in Keats. A likely hypothesis is that the very concept that poetry could create techniques analogous to the *formal* properties of the visual artifact was largely a result of the return of the visual arts to the vanguard of innovation in the early twentieth century. This status of the visual arts came not so much from a change in the subjects or themes treated, but from the new formal techniques employed. Sandburg's poem represents the least innovative approach: the choice of a marginal form that represented concision and "hardness" is coupled with a rather old-fashioned reliance on the figure of the artist and his Sisyphean struggle. The formal analogies are minimal. By contrast, Loy's poem can be seen as art-for-art's-sake polemics that make its structural analogies with a specific work as much the "content" or meaning of the poem as any theme we might extrapolate from it. In other words, the poem does not simply refer to the visual artifact; it is as conscious of that artifact's form as of its referent. This approach is even more obvious in Kolář, who can be seen as the extreme case of this tendency. However, Kolář's work has inherent in it a sort of self-reflexivity due to its historical context—that of concrete poetry—which lends it a certain ironic sophistication beyond that of Loy's piece.

Arp represents the most complex utilization of these and other analogic techniques—excluding, of course, concretism. His poem can be considered a combination of poetry and prose; it contains a narra-

tive and at the same time it is a portrait of the sculptor. Arp demonstrates the sort of technical sophistication that informs Loy's poem while, like Sandburg, essentially referring to the artist himself. Thus Arp's poem cannot be understood as attempting, in the manner of Loy and Kolář, a poetic equivalent to a particular piece of sculpture. It is, rather, a rendering of an entire artistic *oeuvre*. Nowhere does Arp attempt to imitate one isolated piece; what he does instead is imitate the *relations* between various works. He can mirror the iconic similarities between certain pieces with the phonemic similarities of their titles; or he can link the titles in syntactic units, creating a semantic relation (e.g., "The penguins who lay the egg of the new-born"). In other words, whereas Loy uses certain properties of language to imitate a concrete form, Arp relates entire systems, each with their own modes of similarity (iconic and phonemic). "Analogy" means something very different here than it does in Loy.

The study of such a grouping of poets, (beyond whatever insights it may give us into Brancusi's work itself), into the differences between the two media, or into the influence of the visual arts on the poets, also helps us situate the sculptor and his productions in their historical context. It encourages one to consider the relations between Brancusi's work and Futurism, Vorticism, Surrealism, and abstract art. The consideration of such relations is not merely interesting, it is essential and has been and is being undertaken continuously. Works are always seen and understood through other works; this is not true just of new art but also of the art of the past. Yet, while it may always be possible to perceive a work and its meaning and importance from a new or different angle, still there is a certain "received wisdom" that has previously classified any work of the past (either explicitly through comment, or implicitly through neglect). Those perceptions were obviously empowered and limited by their historical contexts, and the appreciation of what those contexts were can help us understand the evaluations made at the time, as well as our own, current values. In this sense, the approach presented here is a form of art historiography and to this end, I believe, one may well listen with profit to the poets' words when viewing the silent works of art.

## NOTES

1. The best known example of this earlier style is Helmut A. Hatzfeld's *Literature Through Art: A New Approach to French Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952).

2. See Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975).

3. As does Wendy Steiner in *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), relating Stein's style to the Cubist movement.

4. See Steiner on William Carlos Williams' "Pictures from Breughel" in *The Colors of Rhetoric* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), or my "Indexicality in Esthetic Signs and the Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Kodikas/Code* (Tübingen), 3, No. 4 (October 1981), 307-14.

5. Cf. Juan Pablo Bonta, *Architecture and its Interpretations: A Study of Expressive Systems in Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979).

6. Richard Crowder, *Carl Sandburg*, Twayne's United States Authors Series, No. 47 (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 77. All further references to this work will be cited in the text.

7. For information on Brancusi, see Sidney Geist, *Brancusi* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1968) and Carola Giedion-Welcker, *Constantin Brancusi*, trans. Mari Jolas and Anne Leroy (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1959).

8. *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), p. 296. All further references to this edition will be cited in the text as "CP."

9. *The Letters of Carl Sandburg*, ed. Herbert Mitgang (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1968), p. 194.

10. Robert Van Gelder, "An Interview with Mr. Carl Sandburg," *New York Times Book Review*, May 31, 1942, p. 2; quoted by Crowder, p. 138. The subject of the influence of photography is a complicated one. Steichen's work seems based on a Symbolist esthetic (cf. Dennis Longwell, *Steichen: The Master Prints 1895-1914* [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978]). Stieglitz hence would seem the more likely influence. Yet Sandburg's brother-in-law's influence may be detectable in what Crowder refers to as the poet's "misty" pieces.

11. For example, see Crowder, p. 56.

12. Peter Jones, *Imagist Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 141. The italics are Pound's own. All further references to Jones will be cited in the text.

13. Harriet Monroe, "Poetry's Banquet," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, 4 (April 1914), p. 26; quoted by Crowder, p. 45. Harry Golden, a life-long friend of Sandburg, in *Carl Sandburg* (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1961), entitles one chapter with what must be taken as a quote of the poet himself: "In Prose You Say What You Mean."
14. *Pep*, 4, No. 1 (January 1916), n. pag. The book was the translation by Mrs. Romilly Feddin (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1912).
15. According to Crowder's interpretation; see pp. 80-81 and *passim*.
16. My discussion of Loy and her life is heavily indebted to Virginia M. Kouidis, *Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980). All further references to this work will be cited in the text.
17. For information on the court proceedings and testimony, see Giedion-Welcker, pp. 212-17.
18. This poem exists in at least three versions, all having minor typographical differences. I use here the one from *Lunar Baedeker* (Dijon: Contact Publishing Co., 1923), pp. 17-18. The poem first appeared in *Dial* (November 1922, pp. 507-08), accompanied by a photograph of the piece.
19. William C. Wees, *Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 92.
20. Pound, "Others," *Little Review*, 4 (March 1918), p. 57; quoted by Kouidis, p. 91.
21. See the *catalogue raisonné* of the *Bird in Space* versions in Athena T. Spear, *Brancusi's Birds* (New York: New York University Press, 1969).
22. Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916; enlarged ed. New York: New Directions, 1970). The sculpture belonged to T. E. Hulme, who was a major disseminator of Bergson's ideas. Kouidis argues for a heavy Bergsonian influence on Loy's esthetics.
23. The "Omega," too, may be a play on the Omega Workshops.
24. "Projet d'Épilogue Pour la Seconde Edition des *Fleurs du mal*," *Baudelaire*, ed. Francis Scarfe (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), p. 32.
25. That this was not a universal perception is shown by Hulme's grouping of Brancusi with Gauguin and Maillol as representatives of "post-impressionism," which he viewed as contrary to the new "geometrical" art of the Vorticists ("Modern Art," in *Speculations*, ed. Herbert Read [1924, rpt. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, n.d.], p. 94).
26. These distinctions are made by Steiner in *Exact Resemblance*, chapter four.
27. *Constantin Brancusi: sculptures, peintures, fresques, dessins*, ed. Christian Zervos (Paris: Edition Cahiers d'Art, 1957), p. 30. A translation exists in *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, ed. Marcel Jean, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 330.

28. *Confound the Wise* (1942), quoted by Robert Carleton Hobbs in *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 17-18.
29. "All nations have laws of prosody," Pound wrote, "... English prosody [is] well known to everyone concerned with the subject. But that is only one form of prosody. Other nations have had different ones: Anglo-Saxon poetry was founded upon alliteration, Greek and Roman was built upon quantity, and the Japanese Hokku got its effect by an exact and never-to-be-added-to series of single syllables." Quoted by Jones, p. 138.
30. Note also the typographical play in "vouïtes" and "emboitages."
31. Space does not permit me to relate this poem to the rest of Arp's poetic output. However, the motifs of the "fairy tale tree," flight, and the moon can be easily discovered in R. W. Last's monograph and selected translations of Arp's German poems, *Hans Arp, The Poet of Dadaism*, Modern German Authors, Texts and Contexts, Vol. I (Chester Springs, PA: Dufour Editions, Inc., 1969).
32. Angelo Maria Ripellino, "Su Kolar," in *Collages*, ed. Jiří Kolař, Einaudi Letteratura, 48 (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1976), p. 14. This volume contains reproductions of all of Kolař's works mentioned in the text.
33. Of the close to two hundred poems based on visual art listed by D. G. Kehl in *Poetry and the Visual Arts* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1975), only twenty-five are concerned with three-dimensional media.
34. "A World Look at Concrete Poetry," Introduction to *Concrete Poetry: a World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 13.
35. "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, *The Structuralist*, No. 12 (1972-73), p. 56; quoted by Steiner, "Res Poetica: The Problematics of the Concrete Program," *New Literary History*, 12 (1980-81), 529.
36. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1965), II. Peirce writes that icons "which represent the relations . . . of parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts, are *diagrams*; . . . every diagram [is an icon], even although [sic] there be no sensuous resemblance between it and its object, but only an analogy between the relations of the parts of each" (pp. 157-58).