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OCTOBER

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The Reasonable Facsimile and
the Philosophical Toy*

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Clara-Clara

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*On First Hearing about
Hermeneutics*

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*Cover photograph: Georges Méliès. La Photographie électrique
à longue distance. 1908.*



Georges Méliès. L'éclipse de soleil en pleine lune. 1907.

On the Eve of the Future:
The Reasonable Facsimile and
the Philosophical Toy

ANNETTE MICHELSON

In preparing these first, tentatively framed reflections on that intersection marked by the invention of the toy termed philosophical, I have had quite constantly in mind my friend, the late Hollis Frampton. To him the larger project, of which this forms a beginning stage, is dedicated.

It is, of course, the cinema, and particularly its prototypes—the phenakistoscope, most notably—which were referred to as toys both philosophical and scientific. These terms, their conjunction, are the product of an era in which science and its technological applications could still be identified with philosophy, and the scientist held to be the natural philosopher. For an early and significant text, for the *locus classicus* on the scientific toy, I turn, therefore, to Baudelaire's *La morale du joujou* (*The Ethic of the Toy*), written in 1859:

I think that children generally do exert influence on their toys, that their choice is directed by inclinations and desires, which, however vague and unformulated, are nevertheless, very real. Still, I would not deny the contrary, that is to say, that toys act upon the child, particularly upon one with literary or artistic inclinations. One would hardly be surprised to see a child of that sort, whose parents take him to the theater, already coming to consider the theater as beauty in its most entrancing form.

There is a kind of toy recently on the increase, and upon which I shall pronounce no judgment of value. I mean the scientific toy. Its principal defect is its high cost. But it can provide extended amusement and develop within the child the taste for surprising and wonderful effects. The stereoscope, which renders a flat image in depth, is of this sort. It has been around a few years now. The phenakistoscope, which is older, is less well known. Let us suppose that a movement of some sort—that of a dancer or tumbler, for example—is divided and decomposed into a certain number of motions. Suppose that each of these motions—twenty in number, if you like—be rep-

resented by a single figure of juggler or of dancer, and that they are all drawn around a circle of cardboard. Adjust this circle, and that of another, pierced with twenty small windows, equidistant from each other, to a pivot at the end of a handle, which you hold as you might a screen before a fire. The twenty little figures, representing the decomposed movement of a single figure, are reflected in a mirror placed opposite you. Set your eye at the level of the little openings, and turn the circles rapidly. The rapidity of the rotation transforms the twenty openings into a single circular one, through which you see reflected in the mirror twenty dancing figures, all exactly alike and executing, with fantastic precision, the same movements. Each small figure has benefited from the nineteen others. On this circle it turns, and its rapidity renders it invisible. In the mirror, seen through the turning window, it stays in one place, executing all the movements distributed amongst the twenty figures. The number of pictures that can be thus created is infinite.

Such was the prototype of the cinema, that toy Baudelaire termed scientific, and others, philosophical, in an era prodigal of natural philosophers, among them the magi of electricity: Ampère, Faraday, Coulomb, Clerk-Maxwell, Edison.

Science, then, as natural philosophy and the inventions of technology as philosophically inspired are the ground of our concern. And our protagonist is Edison, the central figure of a fable composed a century ago, by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, the student of Baudelaire and the master of Mallarmé. *L'ève future* is a late work, written between 1880 and 1886, published three years before Villiers's death in 1889, the year of Edison's visit to the great Exposition Universelle, organized in celebration of the centenary of the French Revolution.

I will propose a reading of this text, in the knowledge that it has not gone wholly without mention within the cinematic context. Its place, however, and its force as epitomization of the dynamics of representation issuing in the invention of the cinema have been utterly neglected. For Bazin, whose single allusion to it in *The Myth of Total Cinema* is laconic, it is a merely peripheral and curious episode in the evolution of realism. My project is genealogical, and I will claim for the text the status of a greatly privileged instance in the formation of our arsenal of mechanical reproduction, initiated, as it were, by photography, extended by telegraphy, phonography, cinematography, holography, television, and the computer. Its fuller understanding will demand, however, that we locate its anticipatory instances, embedded and dispersed within the epistemophilic discourse which traverses the art of the Renaissance and of the Enlightenment until the crisis of modernity. The poetics and metaphysics of symbolism which articulate that crisis mark, as well, the point of cinema's invention, and of the inscription, within its invention, of desire. To speak of that

inscription is, of course, to speak of the perversion at its source. But it is this perversion — characterized as fetishistic — which informs symbolism in its highest and most seminal instances, that of Mallarmé, as that of Villiers, guardians of the Orphic in the era of industrial capitalism, Hegelian idealists in the parish of Auguste Comte.

Our protagonist is Edison, the Faust of industrial capitalism, the wizard of Menlo Park. He is already, when the tale begins, "*le Papa du phonographe.*"

But let Villiers set the scene:

Twenty-five miles from New York, surrounded by a web of electric wires, enclosed within broad and lonely gardens, there stands a dwelling. Its façade looks out upon a luxuriant lawn crossed by sanded walks, leading to a large and isolated cottage. To the south and to the west, two long avenues of ancient trees cast their shade upon this cottage. It is numbered "one" in the village of Menlo Park. Here dwells Thomas Alva Edison, the man who has taken Echo captive.

Edison is a man of forty-two. His physiognomy, some years back, strikingly recalled that of a celebrated Frenchman, Gustave Doré. He had almost the artist's visage translated into that of a scientist. Kindred aptitudes, of different application. Mysterious twins, these two; at what age might the resemblance have been complete? Perhaps it never was. Their two photographs fused, at that time, in stereoscopy, produced the impression that certain effigies of a higher species are realized only through the coinage of faces, scattered far apart amidst the human race.

As to Edison's face, it is, when studied in relation to old prints, the spitting image of Archimedes, of the Syracusan medallion.

Now, towards five o'clock of a recent autumn evening, the wonderful inventor of so many wonders, the Magician of the Ear (who, nearly deaf himself, like a Beethoven of Science, had created that imperceptible instrument which, adjusted to the ear drum's orifice, not only causes deafness to disappear, but further refines the sense of hearing), Edison, I say, retired into the depths of his private laboratory, within the cottage set in seclusion from his castle.

The engineer had, that evening, dismissed his five acolytes, his foremen — devoted, learned, and skilled workers whose rewards were princely and whose silence he commanded. Alone, seated in his American armchair, leaning on his elbows, a Havana cigar between his lips — the tobacco transforming his virile projects into reveries — staring distractedly ahead, his legs crossed, wrapped in his already legendary garment of purple-tasseled black silk, he appeared lost in the depths of meditation.

To his right, a tall window, wide open to the West, aired the vast den, casting a glow of reddening gold upon all its contents.

Here and there, piled upon the tables, were the outlines of precision instruments, the works of unknown mechanisms, of electrical equipment, telescopes, reflectors, of huge magnets, of piped receivers, of vials filled with mysterious substances, and of slates covered with equations.

Outside, over the horizon, the sunset, piercing the distant curtains of foliage on the maple and pine-wooded New Jersey hills, brightened the room for an instant, with a patch of purple or a flash of light. At those instants there streamed, from every side, metallic angles, crystal facets, the curves of batteries.

The wind was cooling. The day's storm had drenched the garden grass — and bathed, as well, the heavy, heady Asian blossoms in their green sheathes, beneath the window. Dried plants hanging between pulleys depending from the ceiling's rafters, released, as it were, reminders of their former perfumed forest life. Under the subtle action of this atmosphere, the dreamer's thought, usually vigorous and lively, relaxed and gave itself up to the seduction, to the pull, of reverie and of dusk.

Into this Faustian sanctum steps Lord Celian Ewald, an old friend of Edison's. He is in love with Miss Alicia Clary. Although a mere "virtuoso" (or, as we would say, performer), she is of the most unique and exquisite beauty. Let us attend to the particulars of her description:

Miss Alicia is barely twenty. She is svelte as the silvery aspen. Her movements are slow, and delicious in their harmony. The lines of her body form an ensemble such as one finds in the greatest sculpture. Their fullness is sheathed in the warm pallor of the tuberose. Here is truly the splendor of a humanized Venus Victrix. Her thick dark hair has the sheen of the southern night. Often, when emerging from her bath, she will tread upon these shining tresses which even water cannot straighten and, tossing them from one shoulder to the other, will cast luxuriant shadows before her, as if from the folds of a mantle. Her face is the most seductive of ovals. Her cruel mouth blooms like a bleeding carnation drunk with dew. Moist lights linger playfully upon those lips, which reveal in dimpled laughter the brilliance of her strong young animal teeth. And her eyebrows quiver at a shadow. The lobes of her delightful ears are cool as April roses. Her nose, exquisite, straight, with lucent nostrils, extends the forehead's plane. . . . Her hands are pagan rather than aristocratic; her feet as elegant as those of Grecian statues. This body is lighted by two fine, dark eyes which glimmer through their lashes. A warm fra-

grance issues from the breast of this human flower, its perfume that of a meadow; its scent is burning, intoxicating, ravishing. The timbre of Miss Alicia's speaking voice is so penetrating, the inflections of her singing voice are so vibrant, so deep, that whether in tragic or noble recitation, or in superb song, she never fails to set me shuddering with a wonder which is, as you shall see, strange indeed.

Such is the catalogue or inventory of Miss Alicia's beauties. And yet, and yet. . . . Lord Ewald cannot rid himself of the awareness of that indelible, essential inner life which confers upon every creature its character, which governs its details, impressions, whether sharp or vague, which shapes experience and reflection. To this substratum of sentience he gives the name of "Soul."

Now, between Miss Alicia's body and soul, he perceives no mere disproportion, but an overwhelming, a total disparity—as if her beauty, which he terms "divine," were alien to her self. Her inner being proclaims a contradiction with her form, so that he finds himself inclined to wonder if, in that which he calls "the Limbo of Becoming" (Yes, Villiers has a Hegelian past, but that is still another story), if then, in the Limbo of Becoming, this woman had somehow strayed into a body which did not belong to her.

Lord Ewald goes on to speak of his sense of that body as a temple (it is Greek, no doubt) profaned by the spirit that now dwells within it. And that spirit, how is it to be described? Its description answers exactly to that of the Absolute Bourgeois, detailed in other of Villiers's polemical tracts, most particularly the portrait of Tribulat Bonhommet, Villiers's own compiler of a Dictionary of Received Ideas, first cousin to Monsieur Homais, to Bouvard and Pécuchet.

Looking and listening to Miss Alicia, Lord Ewald has the impression of a temple profaned, neither by rebellion nor the bloody torches of the barbarian invader, but rather by calculating ostentation, a hard insensitivity, an incredulous superstitiousness. She is, as it were, the priestess of bourgeois positivism, of that belief in progress founded in the materialism of a rising middle class, with its eye to advantage, its meanness and intolerance of excess, its philistinism: the ideology, in short, of commodity fetishism against which Villiers shored up defense together with Baudelaire, his master, and those to whom he was master, Mallarmé and the symbolists.

For Miss Alicia is afflicted with reason. Were she unreasoning Lord Ewald could understand and accept. The marble Venus, after all, has made no compact with reason. The goddess is veiled in mineral and in silence, and her aspect seems to proclaim her beauty incarnate, to declare, "I think only with the mind of the beholder. In my absolute state, all concepts are self-cancelling, limits are dissolved; they collapse, intermingled, indistinct, identical, like waves of a river entering the sea. For the man who reflects me, I am of such depth as he can bestow upon me."

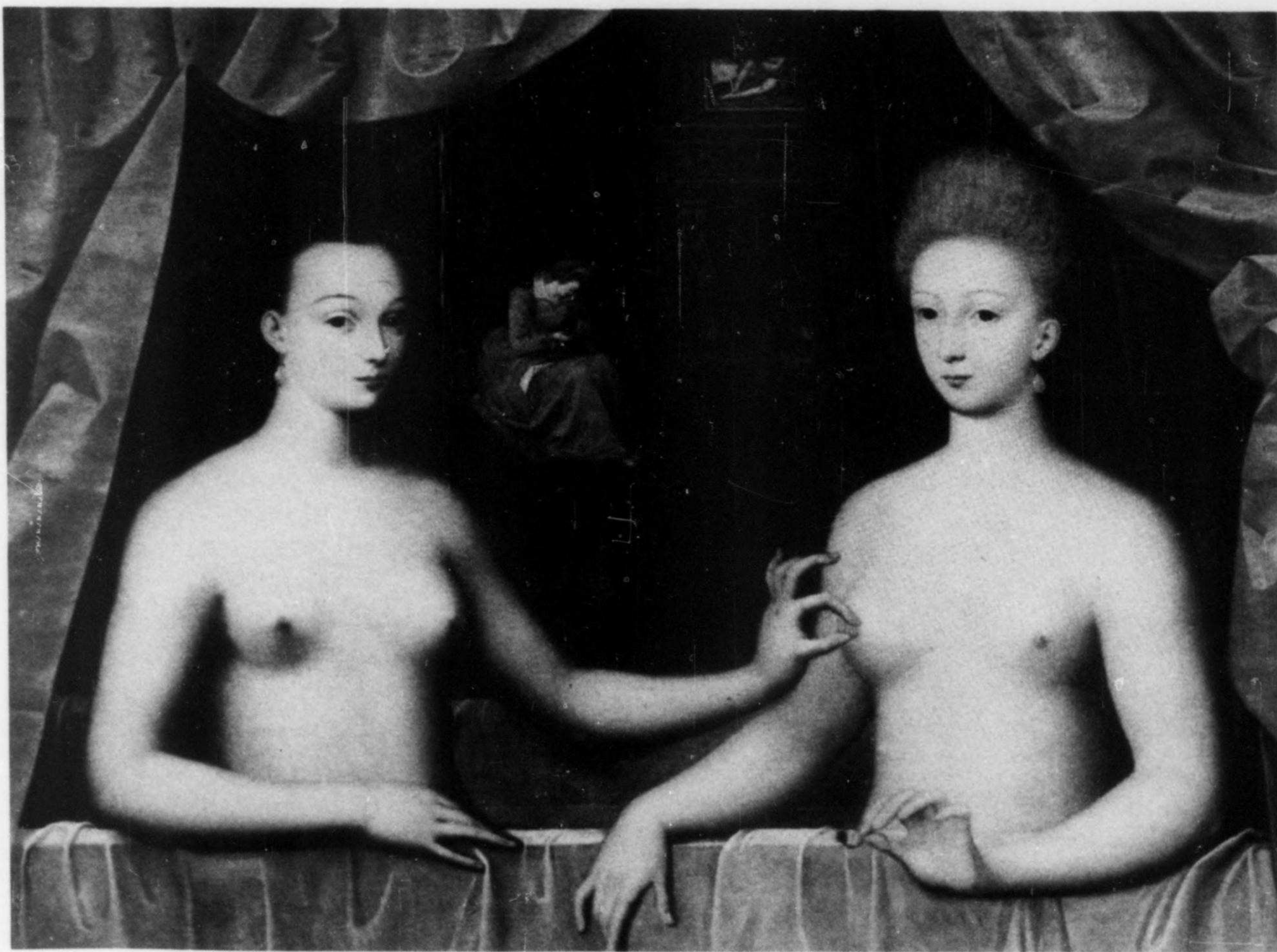
It is Lord Ewald's lament which impels Edison to hasten to completion the

great work upon which he has been engaged lo! these many years. And Villiers's tale becomes the narration of the creation — the fabrication — of a simulacrum, an android in which Miss Alicia's beauty, reproduced in accurate and complete detail, is informed with mind, with spirit. The simulacrum's name will be Hadaly — Arabic, we are told, for Ideal. Lord Ewald, in the climactic passage of the tale, will come to mistake her for Miss Alicia, and his rapture at this fusion of body with spirit is ended only by the destruction of Hadaly in a storm at sea, as they journey to a life of secluded bliss on his ancestral estate in England.

The text is organized on two parameters: the narrative of Lord Ewald's plight and of its resolution, and that of Edison's discourse on method. And this discourse serves persuasion, elaborated in the register of casuistry, all enveloped in a paean to electricity as the Promethean fluid of vivification, pitched to an extremity of lyricism that borders on the pastiche. Tale and discourse converge in the climactic moment of induction of misprision, followed by Lord Ewald's acceptance of the simulacrum for the model.

To pursue our reading, we return to the manner of Villiers's rendering of the female body in its glory of perfection, to its particulars of description. Composed, as one notes, of details, it proceeds, one also notes, downwards, from shining tresses to elegant feet, rather like the male glance of inspection which, as in French, *toise d'un regard*, takes the measure or stock of its object. Detailing, inventorying, cataloguing the body with, of course, the lingering, descending glance at not only the Venus Victrix (as the Venus of Milo, then thought to be a figure of Victory, was then known), but also, by inference, at the Venus of Botticelli, her hair swirling about her shoulders as she rises from the sea. The sculptural ideal of Greece and the pictorial paradigm of the Italian Renaissance are fused in the canonical stereoscopy of this living Venus.

For the rhetorical model of this litany (and it is one of many which punctuate the tale at regular intervals), for the sources of its syntax, we do well to press somewhat further on toward the anticipatory instance generated by the sixteenth century, in that moment marked by erotic art of the high Renaissance in France, in both its poetic and pictorial instances: that of the School of Fontainebleau under François I. For it is here that the notion of the erotic assumes, with a paradigmatic power, a distinctly fetishistic aspect, in its analytic view of the female body. One sees this in the celebrated double portrait of Gabrielle d'Estrées and the Duchess of Villars in their bath (c. 1594) — itself a reference to those of Venus and of Diana — in which the Duchess, naked, like her sister, points to and encircles the nipple of her sister's breast. "What," an old friend asked many years ago as we strolled through the Grande Galerie of the Louvre, "is the Duchess doing to her sister?" She announces, the iconographer tells us, Gabrielle's coming maternity, confirmed by the allusion to the coming birth of the Duc de Vendôme, for whom, in the painting's furthest plane, a nurse prepares a layette. But that ostensive gesture, indicating, pointing, and marking off, is, in its ambiguity, deeply consonant with Fontainebleau's eroti-



*School of Fontainebleau. Gabrielle d'Estrées and the
Duchess of Villars in Their Bath. c. 1594.*

cism: one which marks, dissects, delimits the body, charting, mapping the zones of pleasure. It is thus that the cultural order is inscribed on the body, through clothing, jewels, cosmetics, and, in other civilizations, through scarring, tattooing, extension or binding of the body and its members. This is the work of fetishization, of the mapping of the body in parts, of *la carte du tendre*. Its expression in the sixteenth century of the high Renaissance in France will find poetic instantiation in the invention of a new and highly developed, scandalous, controversial genre: the *blason du corps*, the blazon — or escutcheon — of the female body, in which the poets — among them Clément Marot, its inventor, Michel d'Amboise, Gilles d'Aurigny, Estorg de Beaulieu, Antoine Heroet, François Sagon, Lancelot de Carle, and the foremost of them, Maurice Scève — will fragment and glorify the body of woman. *Blason des cheveux, du front, blason du sourcil, blason de l'oeil, blason de l'oreille, blason du nez*, and, in Clément Marot's celebrated founding work, *Le blason du beau tétin* or *Blazon of the Comely Tit*.

A glance at that founding instance will well repay our attention. The blazon as a form originates during Clément Marot's exile from Fontainebleau. Finding refuge at the court of the Duchesse Renée in Ferrara, he devoted himself, far from the court of François I, to the composition of apologetics and the translation of the Psalms.

The Psalms, lyrics of perpetual praise, articulate, in their enumerative structure and cumulative metaphors, the rhetoric of the Old Testament. Marot, then, impelled by his study of the Psalms, composes his own, but they are secular, to say the least. They are, as we should say, profane. Such was the *Blazon of the Comely Tit*, and the success of this form at the court of François I was such, it is recounted, that not only poets such as Scève, but also the lettered members of the court, the magistrates, the booksellers — and many of the clergy — produced blazons. And their subject was single, central; it was woman, her body already denuded by the artists of Fontainebleau, her seduction evident, her charms half-hidden, her force secret. The tradition of sacred poetry was, then, redirected in the service of the most profane of subjects, for *la femme blasonnée* was not spiritual, but carnal, and each member, every part of her body was precious, venerable. For the fetishistic veneration of the holy relic, the *blasonneurs*, as they were known, substituted the cult of the living detail. Or, one might say, for *le corps glorieux*, the glorified Body of Christ, they substituted the female body. An eroticism in the mode of castration and veneration, fragmenting and glorifying. Woman, subjected to the analytic of dissection is then reconstituted, glorified in entirety and submission: as Marot says in his *Blason du beau tétin*, "He who shall with milk make you swell, makes of a virgin's tit that of a woman, whole and fine."

We have seen that body, a stereoscopy of Greek sculpture and Renaissance painting, generated in conformity with the aesthetic canons of the nineteenth century, submitted to inventory by the lover's eye. Let us now consider how it is constituted, simulated by Edison in the fabrication of Hadaly, the android.

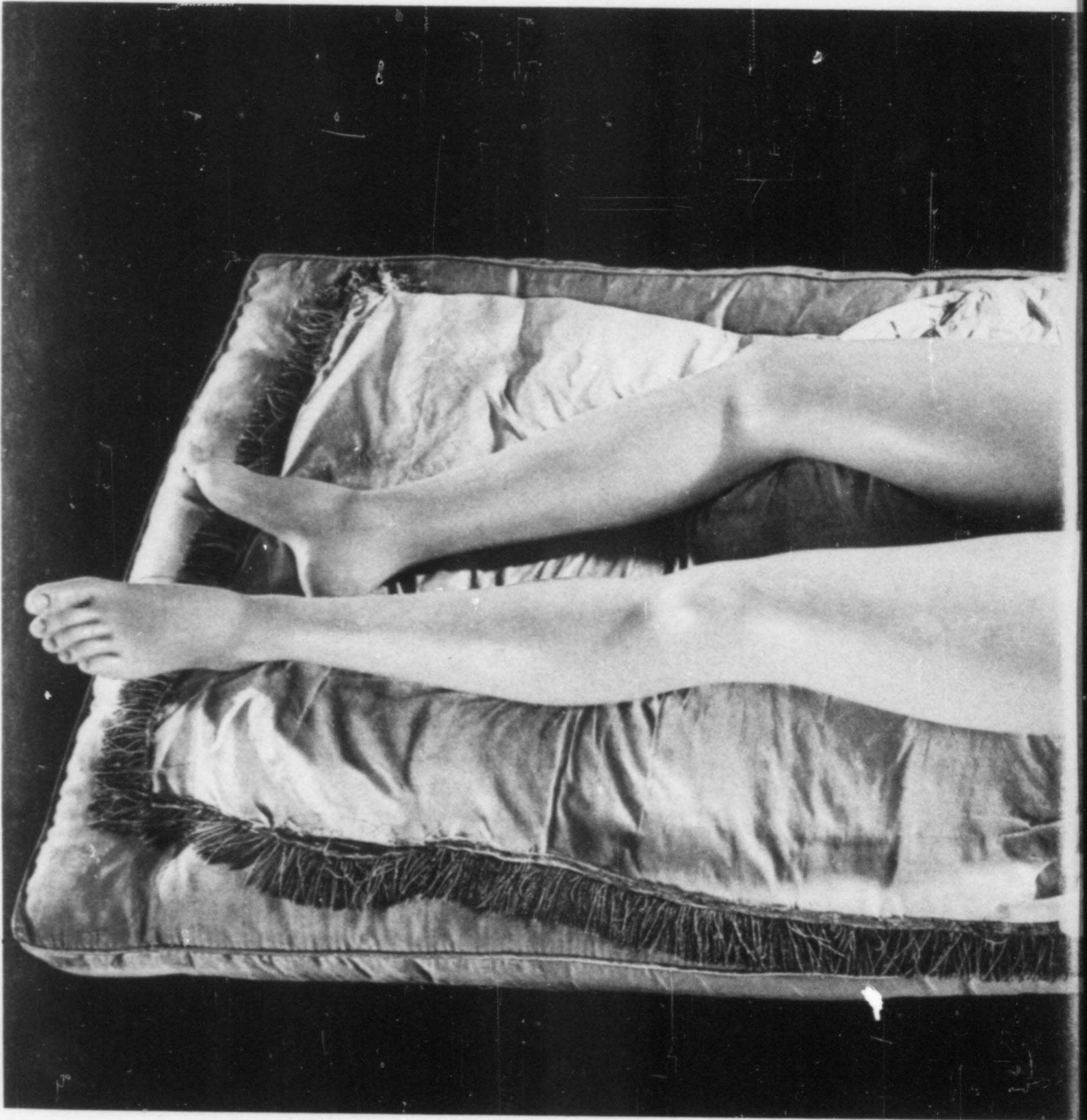
We are told in Chapter One of Book V, entitled "The First Appearance of the Machine in Human Form." Edison speaks:

The Android is subdivided into four parts:

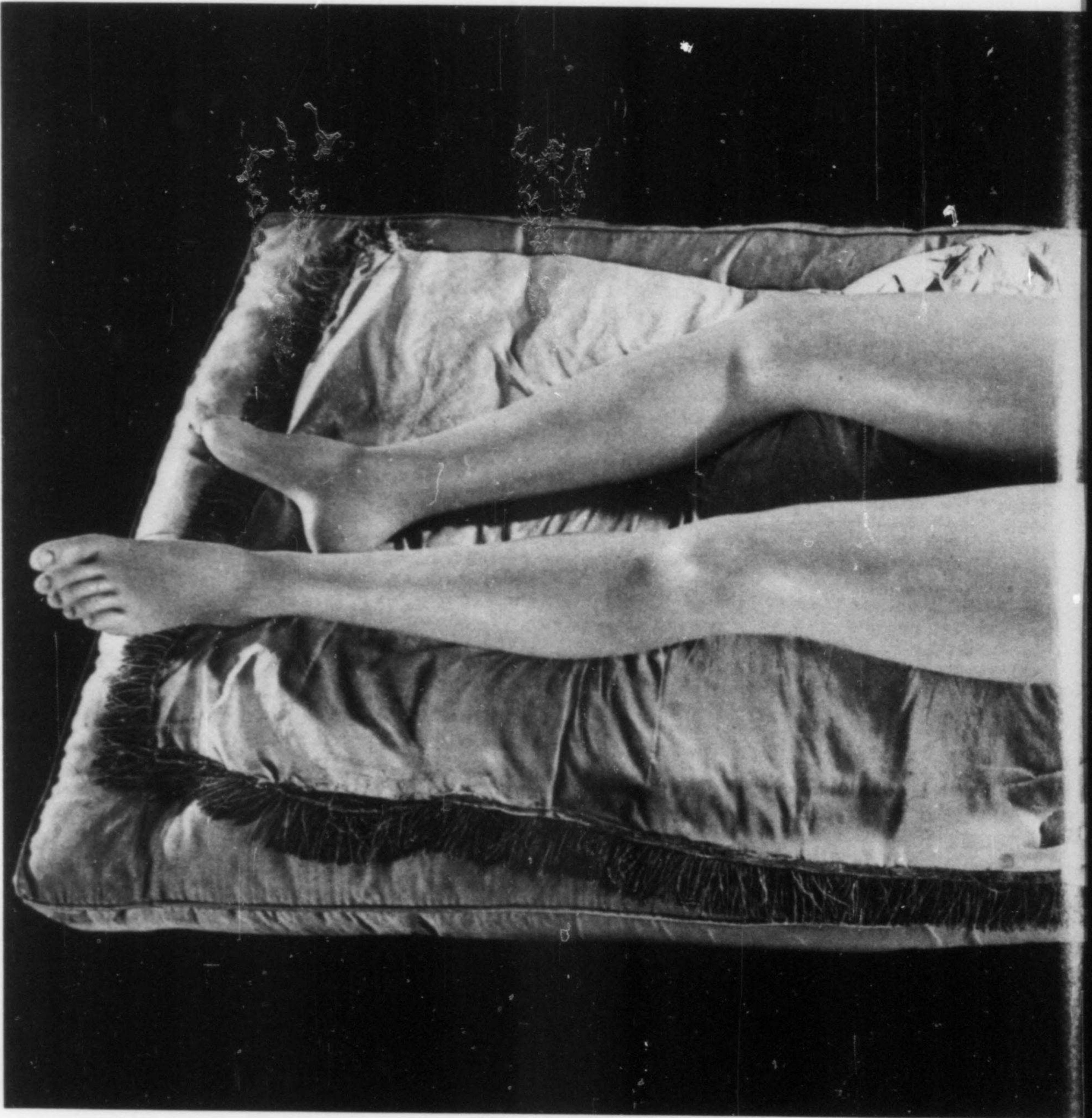
1. The live, internal System, which includes Balance, Locomotion, Voice, Gesture, the Senses, possible facial Expressions, the inner action regulator, or if you prefer, "the Soul";
2. The plastic Mediator, which includes the metallic envelope insulated from the epidermis and the flesh tint, a sort of armor with flexible articulations to which the internal System is firmly attached;
3. The Carnation (or properly speaking, imitation flesh), superimposed upon and adhering to, the Mediator, which (penetrating and penetrated by the animating fluid) includes the traits and lines of the imitated body, with that body's particular personal emanation reproduced, the responses of the skeleton, the modeling of veins, musculature, the model's Sexuality, all bodily proportions, etc.;
4. The Epidermis or human skin, which includes and controls the Complexion, Porosity, Features, the sparkle of the smile, the imperceptible creases of Expression, the precise labial movements of speech, the hair and the entire pilose system, the ocular set, together with the individuality of the Glance, the Dental and Ungular systems.

We are reminded of those medical drawings and anatomical models with layered articulations of nervous, digestive, and circulatory systems, among which those commissioned by the naturalist Felice Fontana in the eighteenth century for the Royal Cabinet of Physics and Natural History in Florence are preeminent. It was the close collaboration of Fontana with designers and modelers, the mobilization of the extraordinary technical prowess of Clemente Susini, which produced, in an era increasingly bent on the scrutiny of the female body, the Waxen Venus. Here is the fastidiously and voluptuously modeled woman in the flush of youth, nude, recumbent, suave and tender of aspect, her digestive, pulmonary, circulatory, and genital systems revealed and resolved into detachable elements. Her balance, her posture, her ever-so-slightly parted lips, her long, gleaming tresses, her pearl necklace, the tassled silken coverlet upon which she lies—these and the presence of pubic hair (none of these indispensable for the purpose of anatomical demonstration)—fashion an object of fascinated desire in which the anatomist's analytic is modulated by the lambent sensuality of Bernini. This Venus yields, responds, one feels, to the anatomist's ruthless penetration with the ecstatic passivity of Saint Theresa or the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni to the ministrations of the Holy Spirit.

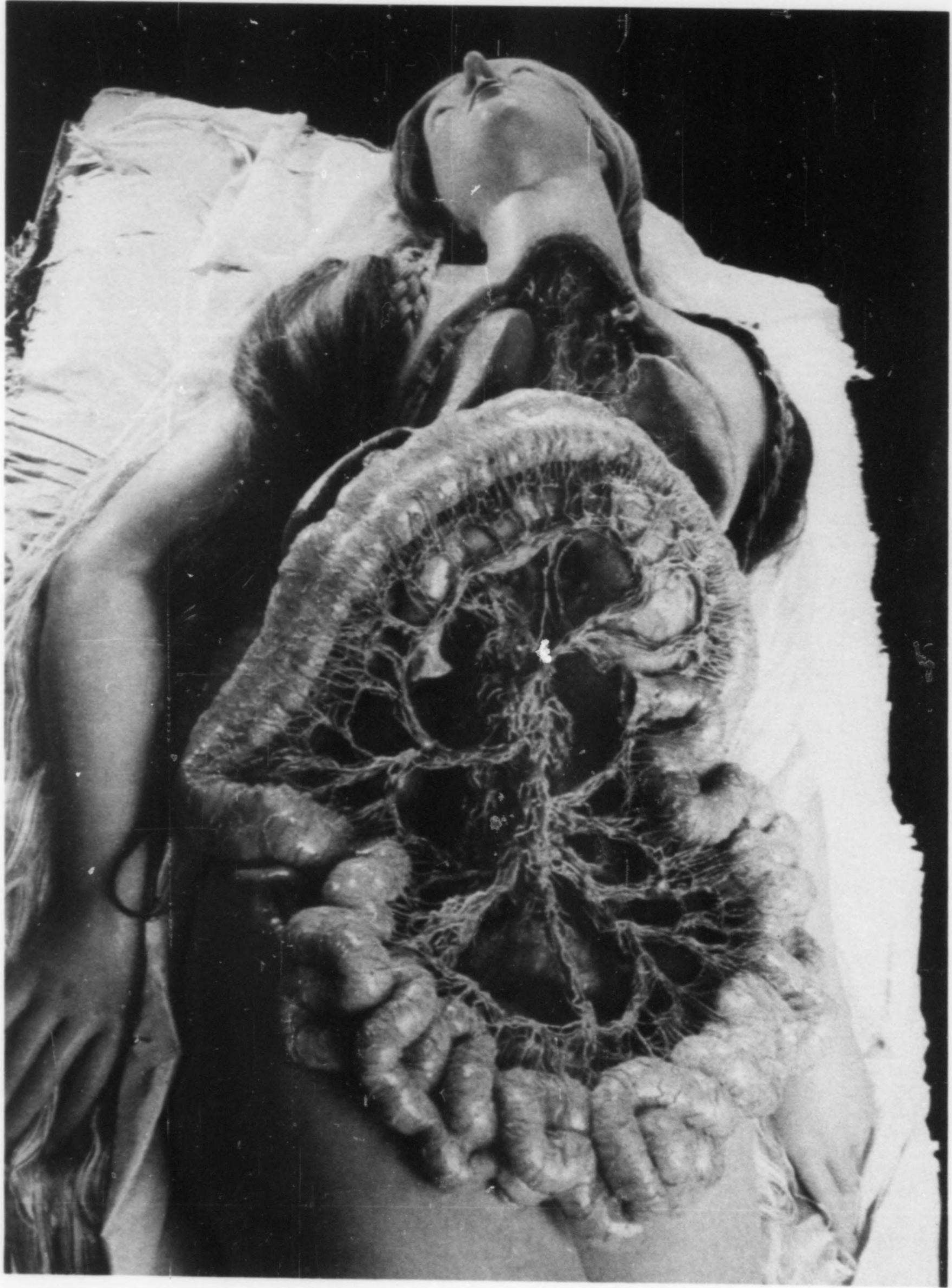
pp. 12-16: Clemente Susini and Giuseppe Ferroni. La Donna della Specola di Firenze. 1782.











"But," says Edison, "the Android presents nothing like the frightful spectacle of our own vital processes. In her everything is rich, ingenious, and somber. Look!" And he presses his scalpel on the central apparatus riveted to the level of the android's cervical vertebrae.

"Here," [he continues] "is the locus of Man's vital center. One prick here and we die instantly. . . . You see that I've respected nature's example here. These two inductors, insulated at this point, match the play of the Android's golden lungs. . . . It is due to the mystery generated in these metal disks and emitted by them that warmth, movement, and strength are distributed through Hadaly's body via this intricate mesh of shining wires, exact replica of our nerves, arteries, and veins. . . . This extremely powerful electro-magnetic motor which I have reduced in size and weight controls all the adjustments of the inductors.

"This spark, bequeathed by Prometheus, harnessed to flow around this truly magic wand, produces respiration. . . . I have even thought of the deep sighs which sorrow elicits from the heart. Hadaly, being of a gentle and silent nature, is aware of them and is no stranger to their appeal. Any woman will acknowledge that these melancholy signs are easily counterfeited. . . .

"These two gold phonographs on an angle inclined towards the center of the chest are Hadaly's two lungs. Between them pass the metallic leaves of her harmonious, I might say, celestial chatter. They operate like sheets of paper run through printing presses. A single ribbon of tinfoil will hold seven hours of speech. These have been composed by our greatest poets, our subtlest metaphysicians, the deepest novelists of our century—geniuses—upon my commission. These never-to-be-published marvels are worth their weight in diamonds. I therefore claim that in Hadaly Intellect is replaced by Intelligence."

We might say, then, that Hadaly has intelligence of the corpus of occidental culture. She is a palimpsest constituted in a synthetic text of Edison's inscription.

"And" [continues Edison], "See, here they are, two imperceptible styluses of pure steel trembling on grooves which rotate due to the unceasing motion of the mysterious spark. They await only Miss Alicia's voice, I assure you. They will capture at a distance, while she, unaware of their action, as an ordinary actress recites scenes incomprehensible to her, the marvelous unknown roles wherein Hadaly will be forever incarnated."

After Villiers's description of other recording devices for gesture, speech,

labial movements, balance — and for all the modulated depths of subtle expression, regulated with perfect precision — Hadaly's scenes, so to speak, are set in place. Hadaly becomes that palimpsest of inscription, that unreasoning and reasonable facsimile, generated by reason, whose interlocutor, Lord Ewald, has only to submit to the range and nuance of *mise-en-scène* possible in what Edison calls the "great kaleidoscope" of human speech and gesture in which signifiers will infinitely float. "And never will her speech deceive your expectations. It will be even as sublime as your inspiration to elicit it. With her you need never, as with the live model, fear misunderstanding. You will have only to remember the rests engraved between the words. Nor need you even articulate the words yourself. Hers will reply to your thoughts and to your silence."

It is a comedy for all time that Ewald is asked to rehearse, and it will take the shock of direct and inadvertent encounter with the completed and perfected android to change his horrified refusal into eager, ardent acceptance, to transform his rejection of mimesis into assenting seduction by the simulacrum.

If, then, Miss Clary is but an empty vessel, Edison's text, whose complex articulations, fine tolerances, and inscriptions will fill that vessel, vivifies the statue's body, fragmenting, analyzing, then restoring, through inscription, this body. We have seen that impulse animating the *blasons d'amour*, the erotic poetry of the high Renaissance, denuding, fragmenting, restoring the painted body of Venus. Where, however, shall we find the model of its inspiriting? Where but in the celebrated image of that statue which founds the epistemology of the ideologues of the Enlightenment, in that statue which Condillac proposes as the sentient, knowing subject in *The Treatise of Sensations* (1754)?

Let us recall something of Condillac's project. It is generated by his need to trace knowledge back to its first elements, employing not direct observation, but a hypothetical and analytic construction. Condillac had, prior to its publication, worked to systematize and popularize Locke's theory, holding that nothing inheres in the intellect which is not given in and by the senses. The source of knowledge was twofold: sensation and reflexion. It was by sensation that we apprehend external phenomena, and by reflexion, internal phenomena. In *The Treatise of Sensations* we have the completed and definitive exposition of Condillac's epistemology. Departing from Locke, he maintains that there exist not two sources of ideas, sensation and reflexion, but one only, sensation. From this he derives the activity of mind. His critique of Locke centers on what he considers to be an insufficiently radical deployment of the natural methods of analysis. If knowledge is sentience, we must trace the process of its generation to its source. We must first resolve it into its elements. Next we must show how these elements will account for the activity of the human soul in all and every form. The faculties of the soul are not innate; they have their origin in sensation itself.

For his analysis of the genesis of our faculties, Condillac, as is quite generally known, made use of a fiction, a fantasy wholly in keeping with the sensi-

bility of the time. He imagined a marble statue (it was Greek, no doubt) with the complete organic structure of the human body, but insentient. He then proceeded to analyze the knowledge such an imaginary being would develop were its senses to be awakened one at a time. He began by allowing it smell. Here is the initial stage of this awakening:

Our Statue being limited to the sense of smell, its cognitions cannot extend beyond smells. It can no more have ideas of extension, shape, or of anything outside itself, or outside its sensations, than it can have ideas of color, sound, or taste.

If we give the statue a rose to smell, to us it is a statue smelling a rose, to itself it is smell of rose. The statue therefore will be rose smell, pink smell, jasmine smell, violet smell, according to the flower which stimulates its sense organ. In a word, in regard to itself, smells are its modifications or modes. It cannot suppose itself to be anything else, since it is only susceptible to sensations.

Let the philosophers, to whom it appears so evident that all is material, put themselves for a moment in its place, and then imagine how they could suspect the existence of anything which resembles what we call matter.

Condillac, in a systematic strategy of *ascription*, then successively endows his statue with taste, hearing, then sight, and so on, with touch the last of the senses. Sensations themselves are referred to that which is external to ourselves. It is something like a theory, say, of intentionality, and our sensations become our ideas of things. Attention, memory, judgment are produced by these sensations, in their interrelations; the emotions and passions—hope, fear, love, hatred, volition—are sensations transformed. For Condillac the nature of thought was wholly unproblematic; it followed from sensibility. Sense is sensibility. *To feel is to think.*

We had recognized in Alicia Clary the lineaments of Venus Anadyomene. Do we, as well, discern in Hadaly, the subject formed by Edison's textual inscription, that marble statue endowed by Condillac's systematic ascription with the parameters of sentience?

We will want once more to note that assiduous, relentless impulse which claims the female body as the site of an analytic, mapping upon its landscape a poetics and an epistemology with all the perverse detail and somber ceremony of fetishism. And may we not then begin to think that body in its cinematic relations somewhat differently? Not as the mere object of a cinematic *iconography* of repression and desire—as catalogued by now in the extensive literature on dominant narrative in its major genres of melodrama, *film noir*, and so on—but rather as the fantasmatic ground of cinema itself.

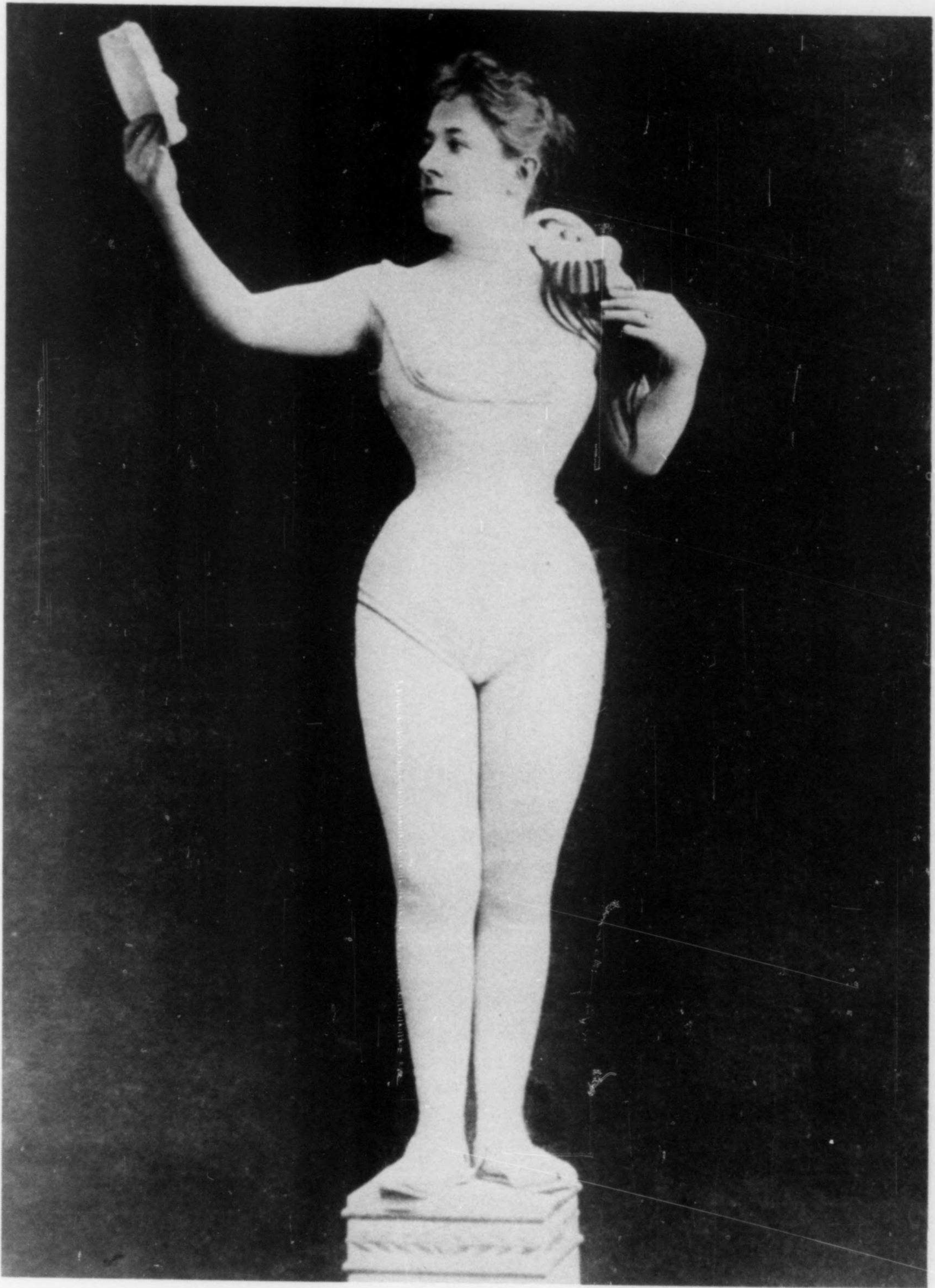
We will then wish to consider once again, and somewhat differently, those acts of magic perpetrated upon the female subject, as by Edison and Méliès in

the films of the primitive period (1900-1906), for the mutilations, reconstitutions, levitations, and transformations performed upon her body are to be read not, as has been suggested, as instances of male envy of the female procreative function. We may rather understand them as the obsessive reenactment of that proleptic movement between analysis and synthesis which will accelerate and crystallize around the female body in an ultimate, fantasmatic mode of representation *as* cinema.

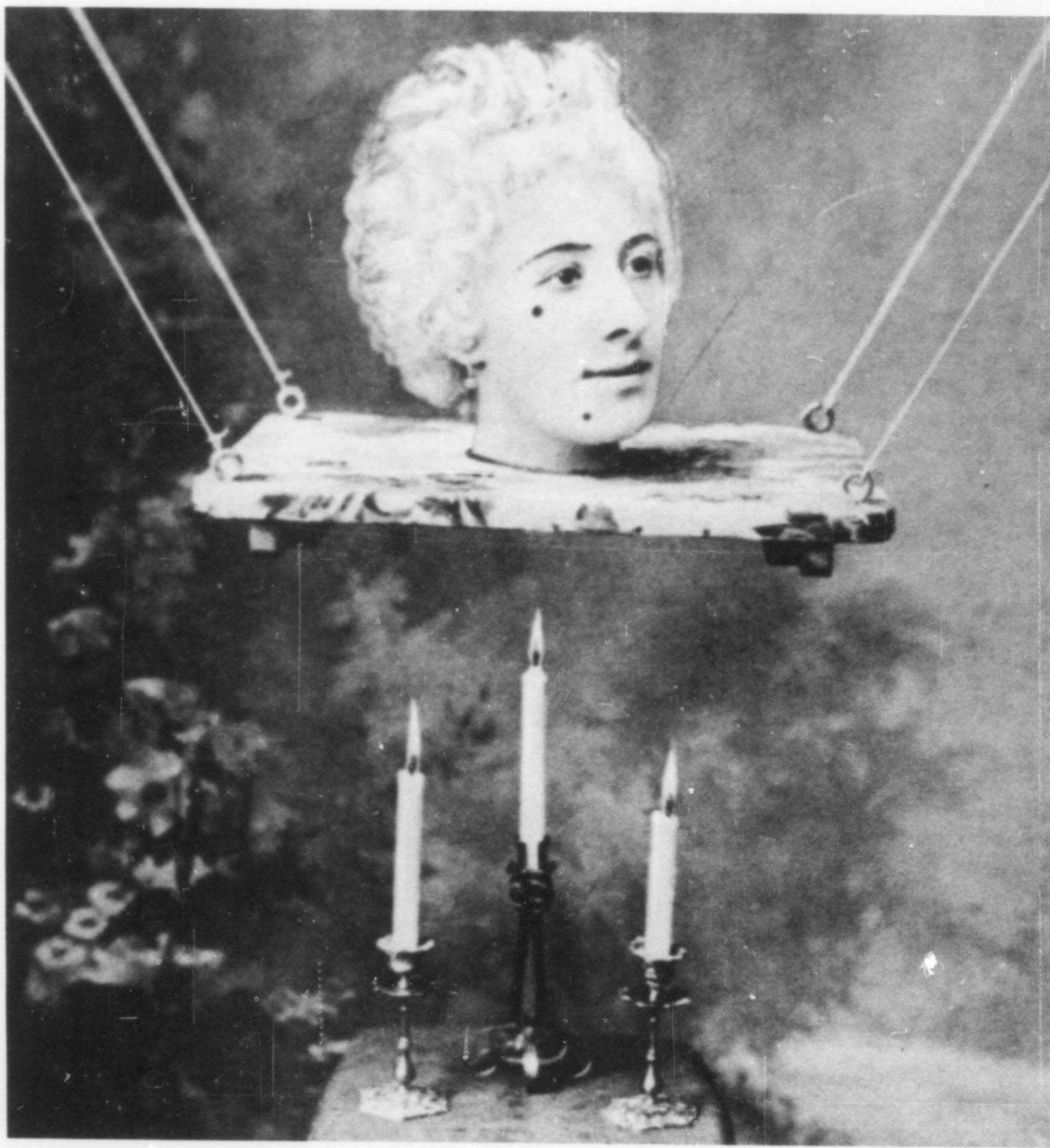
The female body then comes into focus as the very site of cinema's invention, and we may, in an effect of stereoscopic fusion (like that of the two Venuses, like that of Edison and Doré, artist and natural philosopher) see the philosophical toy we know as the cinema as marked in the very moment of its invention by the inscription of desire.

For the moment of Lord Ewald's surrender to his Eve-to-be is that of a world, assenting, on the eve of its future, to that synthesis of the parameters of mechanical reproduction figured as simulacrum of the female body, for whose interlocutor (or spectator) the scene is already set. And this world, assenting, murmurs, "I know, but. . . ."*

* Among the sources consulted in the preparation of this text are: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *L'ève future*, Editions Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Paris, 1960; Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Traité des sensations*, Paris, 1754; Maria Luisa Azzaroli Puccetti, Benedetto Lanza, and Ludmilla Bontempelli, "La Venere Scomponibile," *Kos*, No. 4 (May 1984), 65-94; Lucy Fisher, "The Lady Vanishes: Woman, Magic, and the Movies," *Film Quarterly*, Fall 1979, 29-40.



Jehanne d'Alcy, actress and later wife of Georges Méliès, in 1897.



Jehanne d'Alcy at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin

GEORGES MÉLIÈS

translated by STUART LIEBMAN

Composed Subjects or Scenic Genres

All subjects, of any sort, in which action is readied as it is in the theater and performed by the actors in front of the camera may be placed in a single category. The varieties within this category are innumerable; it includes comic skits, comic operas, burlesques and comedies, peasant stories, the so-called chase scenes, clown acts, acrobatic acts, graceful, artistic, or exotic dance turns, ballets, operas, stage plays, religious scenes, scabrous subjects, plastic tableaux, war scenes, newsreels, reproductions of news items, accident reports, catastrophes, crimes, assassinations, etc. — many more than I can list — as well as the most somber tragedies. The cinematographic realm knows no bounds; all subjects that the imagination can provide are suitable, and it seizes upon them. It is especially this category and the following one that have given immortality to the cinematograph because the subjects conceived by the imagination are infinitely varied and inexhaustible.

I now come to the category of cinematographic views exhibitors call *transformation views*. I find this trade name, however, unsuitable. Since I myself created this special area, I think I may say that the term *fantastic views* would be far more accurate. For if a certain number of these views in fact include scene changes, metamorphoses, or transformations, there are also a large number without transformations. They have instead many trick effects of theatrical ma-

* The following text is a translation of the article published in *La Revue du Cinéma* (October 15, 1929) as advance publicity for the Méliès gala organized by Paul Gilson and J.-G. Auriol and held on December 6, 1929, at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. The article is a considerably shortened version of the one Méliès wrote at the request of Roger Aubry, editor of the *Annuaire Général et International de la Photographie*. The original, published in the 1907 issue of the *Annual*, contains additional valuable material about scientific and documentary films, lighting, costumes, props, rehearsal practices, shooting techniques, film development, and production costs. The first version was reprinted in the catalogue, *Exposition Commémorative du Centenaire de Georges Méliès*, Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1961.

I wish to thank Annette Michelson for reviewing this translation and for helping to make it more accurate and lively. — Tr. [All notes have been provided by the translator.]

chinery, mise-en-scène, optical illusions, and a wide range of processes that can only be called *trick shots*, hardly an academic name, but one that has no equivalent in refined discourse. Whatever the case may be, this category's domain is by far the most extensive, for it encompasses everything from natural views (documentary [*non-préparées*] or contrived [*truquées*] although shot outdoors) to the most imposing theatrical performances. It includes all the illusions that can be produced by prestidigitation, optics, photographic tricks, set design and theatrical machinery, the play of light, dissolves (*dissolving views*¹ as the English have called them), and the entire arsenal of fantastic, magical compositions that turn the most intrepid into madmen. With no intention of disparaging the first two categories, I am nevertheless going to speak solely about the latter two² for the very simple reason that there I shall be entirely on home ground and able, consequently, to expound them with full knowledge of the facts. Since the day — and this goes back ten years — when countless producers of cinematographic views began to throw themselves into the making of outdoor views and comic scenes, whether good, bad, or excellent, I abandoned the simplest types and specialized in subjects whose interest lies in their difficulty of execution. To these I have exclusively devoted my efforts.

Cinematographic art offers such a variety of pursuits, it demands so much work of all kinds, and requires such sustained attention that I sincerely do not hesitate to proclaim it the most enticing and most interesting of the arts, for it makes use of almost all of them. Dramatic techniques, drawing, painting, sculpture, architecture, mechanical skills, manual labor of all sorts — all are employed in equal measure in this extraordinary profession. The amazement of those who have happened to watch part of our work always affords me the utmost pleasure and amusement.

The same phrase invariably comes to their lips: "Really, it's extraordinary! I never imagined that so much space and material were needed, that so much work was required to obtain these views! I didn't have any idea at all of how they were made."

Alas, afterwards they know little more, for one has to put, as they say, one's nose to the grindstone, and for a long time, for a thorough knowledge of

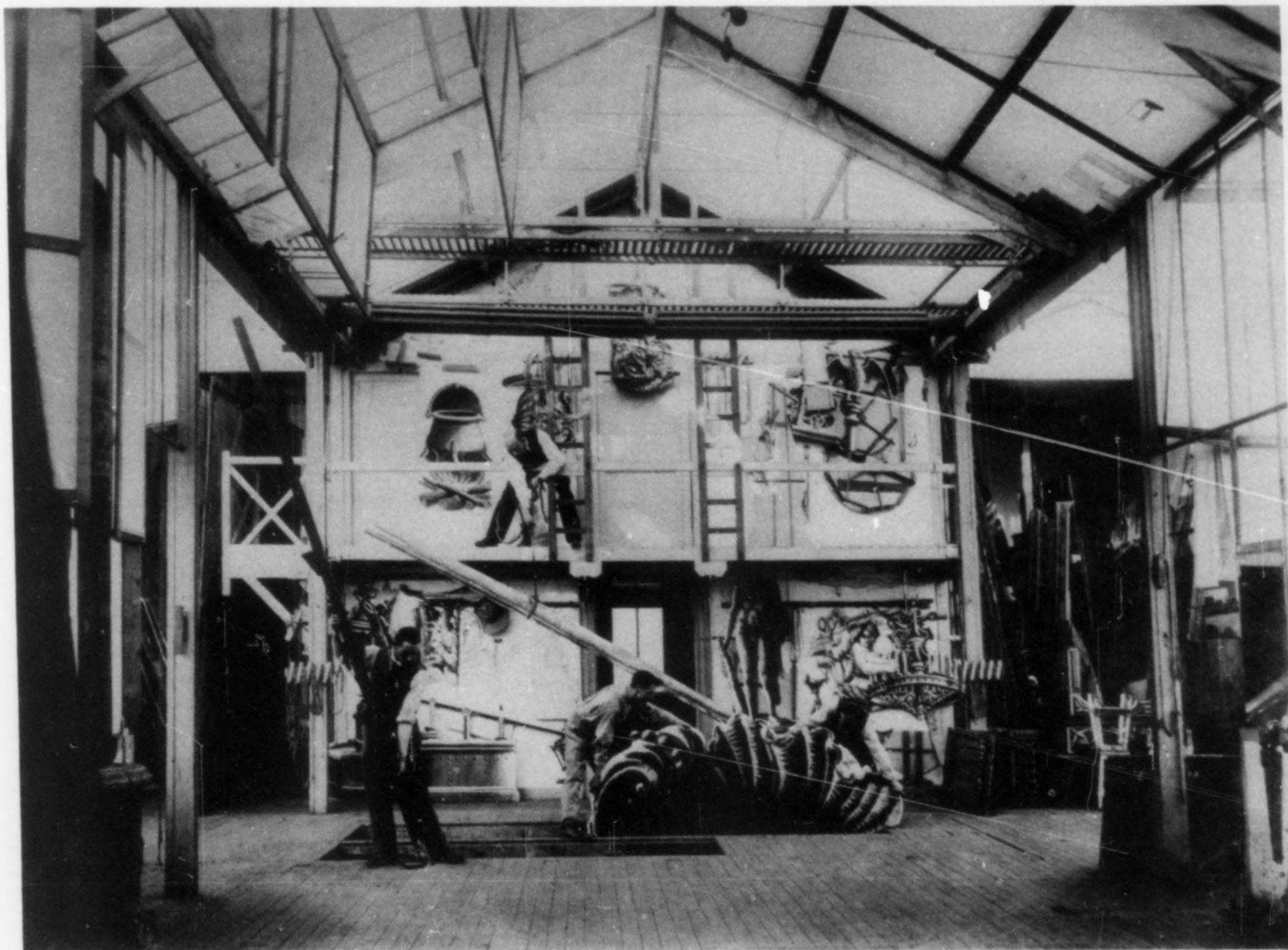
1. English in the original.

2. Méliès's division of film production into four genres is difficult to comprehend because parts of the original text have been omitted. The first category, the so-called "natural views," includes documentary films of the type made popular by the Lumière brothers. The well-known *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* obviously belongs in this group. The second category encompasses several kinds of scientific films from recordings of microorganisms to didactic illustrations of surgical operations. Films in the third category, "composed subjects," were primarily records of staged performances filmed either out-of-doors or in the studios. The last category, "transformation views," includes films that employed theatrical tricks and optical illusions similar to those developed by Méliès at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin and cinematic effects (such as superimposition, jump cuts, etc.) also invented by Méliès. As Méliès himself indicates, the four cinematic genres overlap considerably.

the innumerable difficulties to be surmounted in a profession in which everything, even the seemingly impossible, is realized, and the most fanciful dreams are given the semblance of reality. Finally, needless to say, one must absolutely realize the impossible, since one photographs it and renders it visible.

The Shooting Studio

For the special kind of view that concerns us, a studio had to be contrived *ad hoc*. Briefly, it combines a photographic studio (in gigantic scale) with a theatrical stage. The structure is made of iron and glass. The cabin of the camera operator is located at one end, while at the other end, a stage is situated, constructed exactly like one in a theater and fitted with trapdoors, scenery slots, and uprights. Of course, on each side of the stage there are wings with store-rooms for sets, and behind it there are dressing rooms for the artists and extras. The stage includes a lower section containing the workings for the trapdoors and buffers necessary for the appearances and disappearances of the diabolical gods



Georges Méliès's studio.

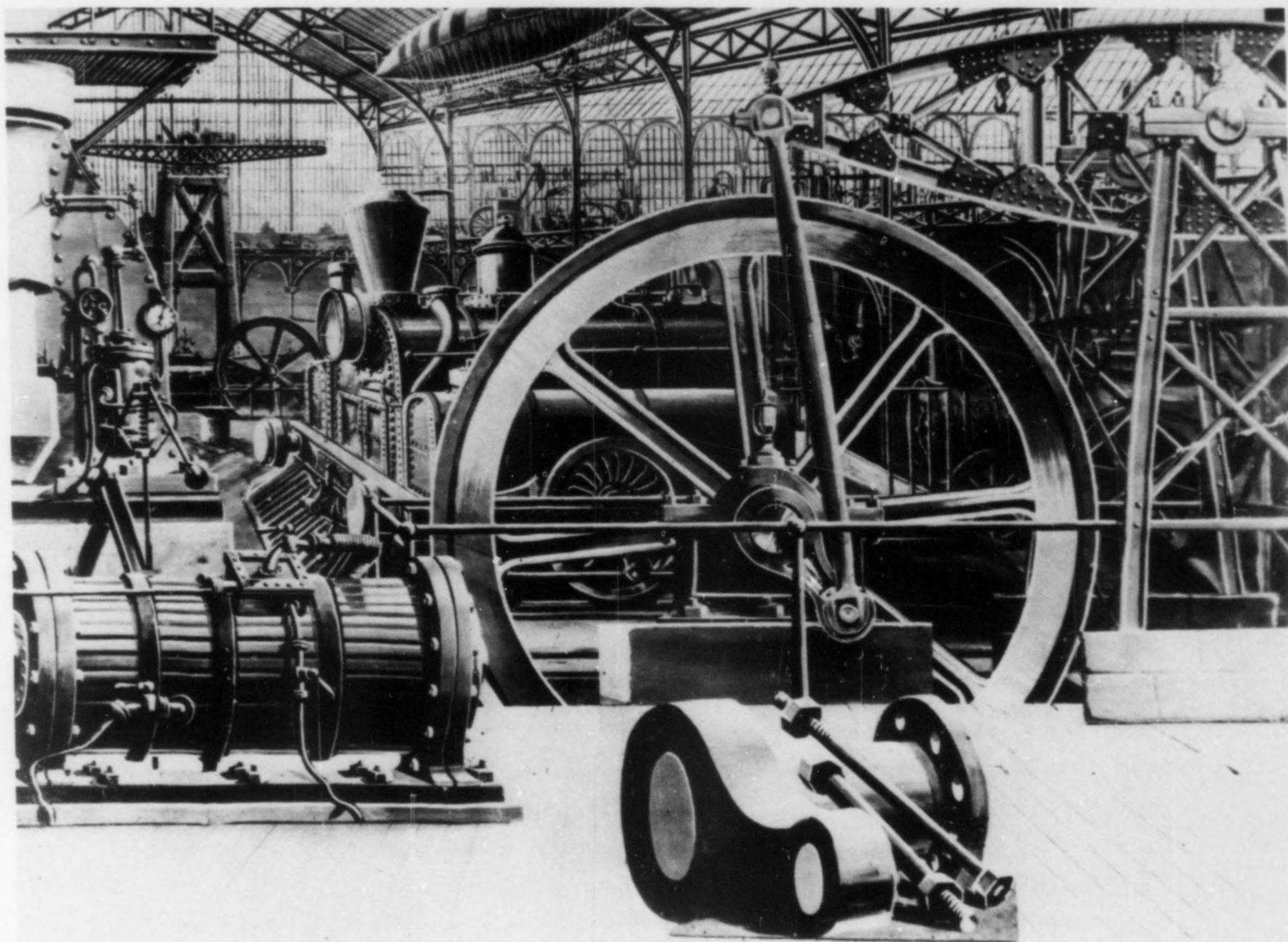
in fairy plays (*féeries*), and slips in which flats can be collapsed during scene changes. Overhead, there is a grate with the rollers and winches needed for maneuvers requiring power (flying characters or vehicles, oblique flights of angels, fairies, or swimmers, etc., etc.). Special rollers help to move the canvas panoramas; electric projectors help to light and to intensify the ghosts. We have, in short, a quite faithful, small-scale likeness of a *théâtre de féerie*. The stage is about thirty-two feet wide with an additional nine feet of wings upstage and downstage. The length of the whole, from the forestage to the camera, is fifty-five feet. Outside, there are iron hangars for the construction of wooden props, sets, etc. . . . and a series of storerooms for the construction materials, props, and costumes.

The Composition and Preparation of Scenes

Composing a scene, a play, a drama, a fairy play, a comedy, or an artistic tableau naturally calls for the creation of a scenario drawn from the imagination and then a search for the effects that will bring it off for the audience; creating sketches and models of the sets and costumes; finding the chief attraction without which no view has a chance of success. As far as illusions or fairy plays are concerned, the invention, combination, and outlines of the tricks and the preliminary study of their construction requires special care. The *mise-en-scène* as well as the movements of the extras and the placement of the production crew are also arranged in advance. The work is absolutely analogous to readying a play in the theater, but with this difference: the author must know how to work out everything by himself on paper, and consequently he must be the author [scriptwriter], director, designer, and often an actor if he wants to obtain a unified whole. The person who devises the scene ought to direct, for it is absolutely impossible to make it succeed if ten different people get involved. Above all, one must know exactly what one wants and go over the roles that each will have to perform. One must not lose sight of the fact that one does not rehearse for three months as in the theater, but only for a quarter of an hour at most. If you lose time, the light goes down—and goodbye photography. Everything, especially the stumbling blocks to be avoided during the performance, must be anticipated. In the scenes requiring machines there are many.

The Sets

The sets are produced by following a chosen model; they are constructed in wood and cloth in a workshop adjoining the shooting studio and painted in distemper like theatrical sets, except that the painting is executed exclusively in *grisaille* through all the intermediate gradations of gray between black and pure white. This gives them the look of funerary decorations, with a strange effect on those seeing them for the first time. Colored sets come out very badly. Blue be-



comes white, reds, greens, and yellows become black; a complete destruction of the effects ensues. It is therefore necessary that sets be painted like photographers' backdrops. The painting, unlike that of theatrical sets, is very carefully done. The finish, the correctness of the perspective, the *trompe l'oeil* skillfully executed to tie the painting to real objects just as in panoramas³ — all is needed to give an appearance of truth to the entirely artificial things that the camera will photograph with absolute precision. Anything poorly made will be faithfully reproduced by the camera and you must therefore keep your eyes peeled and produce the sets with meticulous care. I only know this: in material matters, the cinematograph must do better than the theater and it must not accept conventional practices.

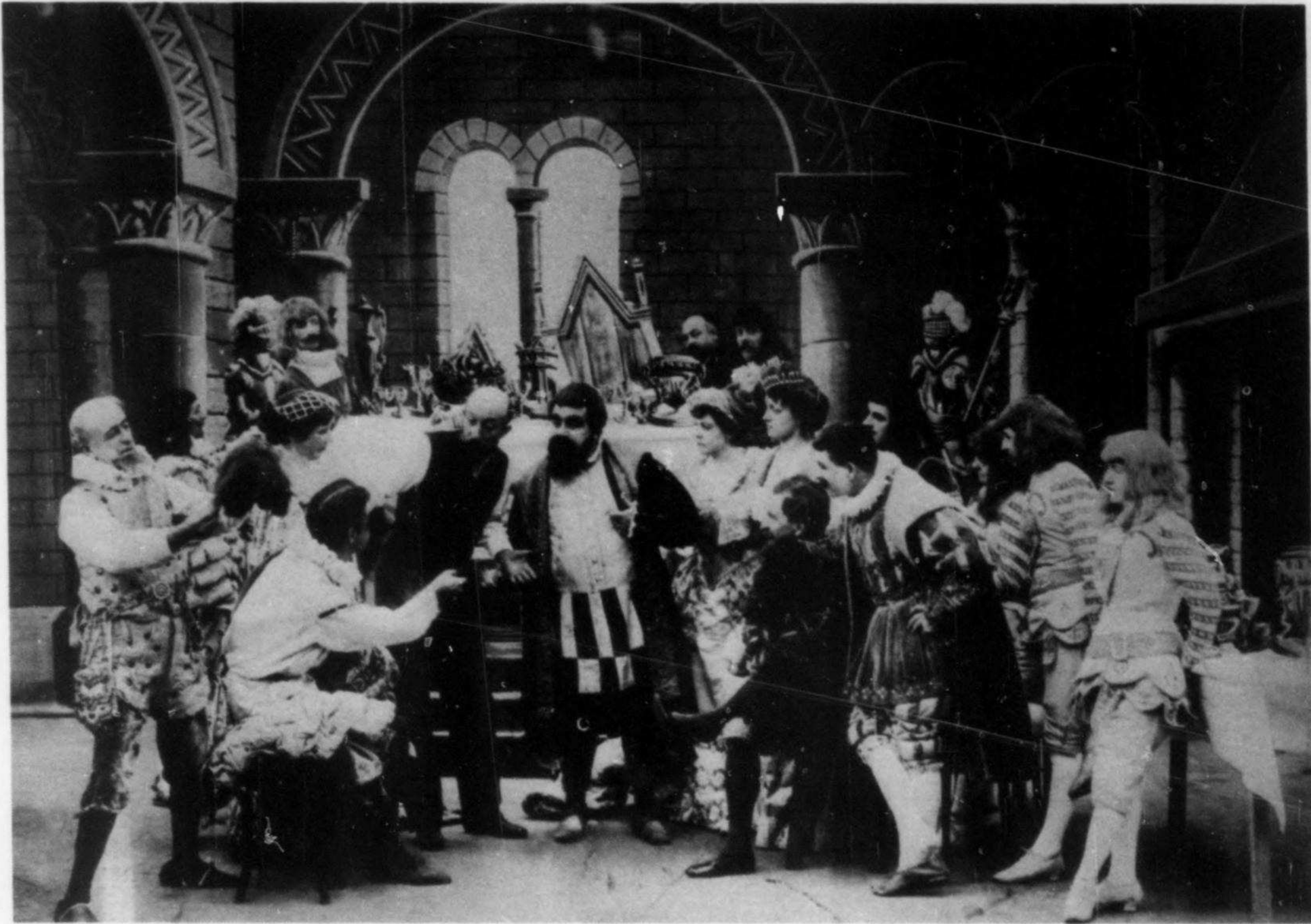
3. For a description of the historical precedents for such panoramas and of the ways in which real objects were linked with large-scale projected images, see L.J.M. Daguerre, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Daguerreotype and the Diorama*, New York, Winter House, 1971; see also Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *L. J. M. Daguerre*, New York, Dover, 1968.

The Actors and Extras

Contrary to general belief, it is very difficult to find good performers for the cinematograph. An actor of excellence in the theater, even a star, is worth absolutely nothing in a cinematographic scene. Often professional mimes are bad because they perform in pantomime according to conventional principles, just like mimes in a ballet who have a special, immediately recognizable performance style. Though very superior in their specialty, these artists are disconcerted as soon as they come into contact with the cinematograph. This is because cinematographic miming requires training and special qualities. No longer is there an audience for the actor to address, either verbally or with gestures. The camera alone is spectator, and nothing is worse than to look at it and to concern oneself with it while performing, which is what invariably happens at first to actors accustomed to the stage but not to the cinematograph. The actor must realize that, while remaining completely silent, he must make himself understood by the deaf spectators who watch him. His performance must be unostentatious and very expressive, with few gestures, but ones that are very distinct and clear. Perfection of facial expression and great accuracy of pose are indispensable. I have seen numerous scenes performed by well-known actors; they were not good because the principal element of their success, the word, was not available in the cinematograph. Accustomed to speaking well in the theater, they used gestures only as an accessory to speech, while in the cinematograph, the word is nothing and the gesture is everything. Nevertheless, some, Galipaux among others,⁴ have made some good scenes. Why? Because he is accustomed to using solo pantomime during his monologues, and he is endowed with a very expressive face. He knows how to make himself understood without speaking, and his movements, even if deliberately exaggerated—which is necessary in pantomime and especially in photographed pantomime—are always appropriate. When accompanying his speech, an actor's gesture is very telling, but it is no longer comprehensible when he mimes. If you say, "I am thirsty," in the theater, you do not close your hand and bring your thumb to your mouth to simulate a bottle. It's completely useless since everyone understood that you are thirsty; but in pantomime, you are obviously obliged to make this gesture.

That's all quite simple, isn't it? And yet, nine times out of ten, this does not work for anyone not accustomed to miming. Nothing can be improvised;

4. Félix Galipaux was a popular music hall actor who, with Coquelin Cadet, created a vogue for monologue performances in the 1880s. According to Jacques Deslandes (*Histoire comparée du cinéma*, vol. I, pp. 297-298), Galipaux first performed for the camera in 1896-97 when Emile Reynaud produced a film of *Le premier cigare*, one of Galipaux's well-known music hall routines. Galipaux later appeared in films by Zecca and in a number of Méliès's films, including *An Adventurous Automobile Trip* (1905). According to Georges Sadoul (*Histoire générale du cinéma*, vol. II, p. 459), Galipaux also starred in some of the first sound films produced in France by Pathé, including *La lettre* and *Au téléphone* (both 1905).



Georges Méliès with the cast of La tour de Londres ou les derniers moments d'Anne de Boleyn. 1904.

everything must be learned. It is also advisable to consider how the camera will render a gesture. In a photograph, the characters overlap each other, and the greatest care must always be taken to make the principal characters stand out and to moderate the fervor of the supporting characters who are always inclined to gesticulate at the wrong time. This produces a jumble of bustling people in the photograph. The audience no longer knows whom to look at and no longer understands any of the action. The phases of action must be successive, not simultaneous. The actors must consequently pay attention and perform only in turn, at the precise moment when their participation becomes necessary. There is one more thing that I have very often had difficulty in making clear to performers who are always inclined to show off and get themselves noticed to the great detriment of the action and the whole; generally speaking, they are too spontaneous. How much tact is needed to moderate their excessive spontaneity without offending them! Strange as it may seem, each performer in the rather numerous troupe that I employ has been chosen from twenty or thirty I have tested in succession before obtaining what was needed, even though all were very fine artists in the Parisian theaters in which they worked.

Not everyone has the necessary qualities, and good will, unfortunately, does not replace those qualities. Those who have them take quickly to the task; others never do. Female performers who are good at mime are rare. Many are fine, intelligent, beautiful women, but when they must mime a somewhat difficult scene, woe is me! A thousand times woe! Those who have never witnessed the tribulations of a director have never seen anything. I hasten to add that there are, very fortunately, exceptional cases of women who perform very gracefully and intelligently. Conclusion: forming a good cinematographic troupe is a long and difficult business. Only those with no concern for art satisfy themselves with first comers playing a confusing and uninteresting scene.

Trick Effects

It is impossible in this already long talk to explain in detail the execution of cinematographic tricks. That would require a special study; moreover, practice alone clarifies the details of the processes used, some involving unheard of difficulties. I can say without bragging, since all those in the profession are well aware of this, that it was I myself who successively discovered all the so-called "mysterious" processes of the cinematograph. The producers of composed scenes have all more or less followed the beaten path, and one of them, the head of the world's largest cinematographic company (considered from the viewpoint of its huge, low-cost production), told me himself: "It is thanks to you that the cinematograph has managed to sustain itself and to become an unprecedented success. By joining animated photographs with the theater, that is, with an infinite variety of subjects, you prevented its fall, which would otherwise have rapidly occurred with outdoor scenes whose inevitable uniformity would have quickly bored the audience."

Without false modesty, I confess that this glory — if glory it is — pleases me most. Do you want to know how the idea of applying trick effects in cinematography first came to me? Very simply, upon my word. One day, when I was photographing as usual at the Place de l'Opéra, the camera I used at the beginning (a primitive one in which the film tore or frequently caught and refused to advance) jammed and produced an unexpected result; a minute was needed to disengage the film and to make the camera work again. During this minute, the passersby, a horse trolley, and the vehicles had, of course, changed positions. In projecting the strip, rejoined at the point of the break, I suddenly saw a Madeleine-Bastille trolley change into a hearse and men changed into women.

The substitution trick, called the stop-motion trick, had been discovered and, two days later, I produced the first metamorphoses of men into women and the first sudden disappearances which at first had such great success. It was thanks to this very simple trick that I made the first fairy plays, *The Devil's Manor*, *The Devil in the Convent*, *Cinderella*, etc. . . . One trick led to another. Even before this new type was successful, I used my ingenuity to find new techniques and I

conceived in turn of the fade (obtained by a special device in the photographic camera), appearances, disappearances, metamorphoses obtained by superimpositions on black grounds or on sections set aside in the sets; then came superimpositions on white grounds that had already been exposed (something everyone declared to be impossible before they saw it) realized with the help of a stratagem I cannot discuss because imitators have not yet entirely discovered its secret. Then came the tricks with cut-off heads, the doubling of characters, of scenes performed by a single character who through doubling ends by portraying all by himself up to ten similar characters performing a comedy with each other. Finally, using my special knowledge of illusions acquired through twenty-five years of practice at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin, I introduced mechanical, optical, and prestidigitation tricks, etc., to the cinematograph. With all these methods combined and competently used, I do not hesitate to say that in cinematography it is today possible to realize the most impossible and improbable things.

In any case, it is the trick, used in the most intelligent manner, that allows the supernatural, the imaginary, even the impossible to be rendered visually and produces truly artistic tableaux that provide a veritable pleasure for those who understand that all branches of art contribute to their realization.



Richard Serra. Clara-Clara. 1983.

A Picturesque Stroll around *Clara-Clara**

YVE-ALAIN BOIS

translated by JOHN SHEPLEY

"When Smithson went to see *Shift*," Serra tells us, "he spoke of its picturesque quality, and I wasn't sure what he was talking about" (p. 181).¹ This incomprehension is quite comprehensible, at least if one sticks to early definitions of the picturesque, all of which go back to the etymological origin of this word, that is to say, the sphere of painting. For the pictorial is one of the qualities that Serra would like to banish completely from his sculpture. In speaking of his first *Prop Pieces*, he criticizes them for retaining pictorial concerns (the use of the wall as background), since such a reminder detracts from their meaning (which is prescribed by the way they are made) (p. 142). In speaking of the numerous works created by laying out materials on the floor, works that appeared in the late 1960s as a criticism of minimalism, in which he himself had participated, Serra severely judges their debt to painting in this respect: "Lateral extension in this case allows sculpture to be viewed pictorially — that is, as if the floor were the canvas plane. It is no coincidence that most earth works are photographed from the air" (p. 16). Which takes us back to Smithson: "What most people know of Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, for example, is an image shot from a helicopter. When you actually see the work, it has none of that purely graphic character. . . . But if you reduce sculpture to the flat plane of the photograph . . . [y]ou're denying the temporal experience of the work. You're not only reducing the sculpture to a different scale for the purposes of consumption, but you're denying the real content of the work" (p. 170). Far be it from Serra, of course, to suggest that Smithson had approved such a reduction of his work to the plani-

* This essay was first published as "*Promenade pittoresque autour de Clara-Clara*," in the *Richard Serra* catalogue published by Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983. The author thanks Mirka Beneš, Jacques Lucan, Monique Mosser, Baldine Saint-Girons, and Bruno Reichlin for the advice and information that they so generously gave.

1. Most of the quotations from Serra given here are taken from the collection of his texts and interviews published in 1980 by the Hudson River Museum (*Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc. 1970-1980*). Reference will be made to it in the text by a simple page number; note numbers will only appear for texts by Serra later than the publication of this collection, or for texts other than his.

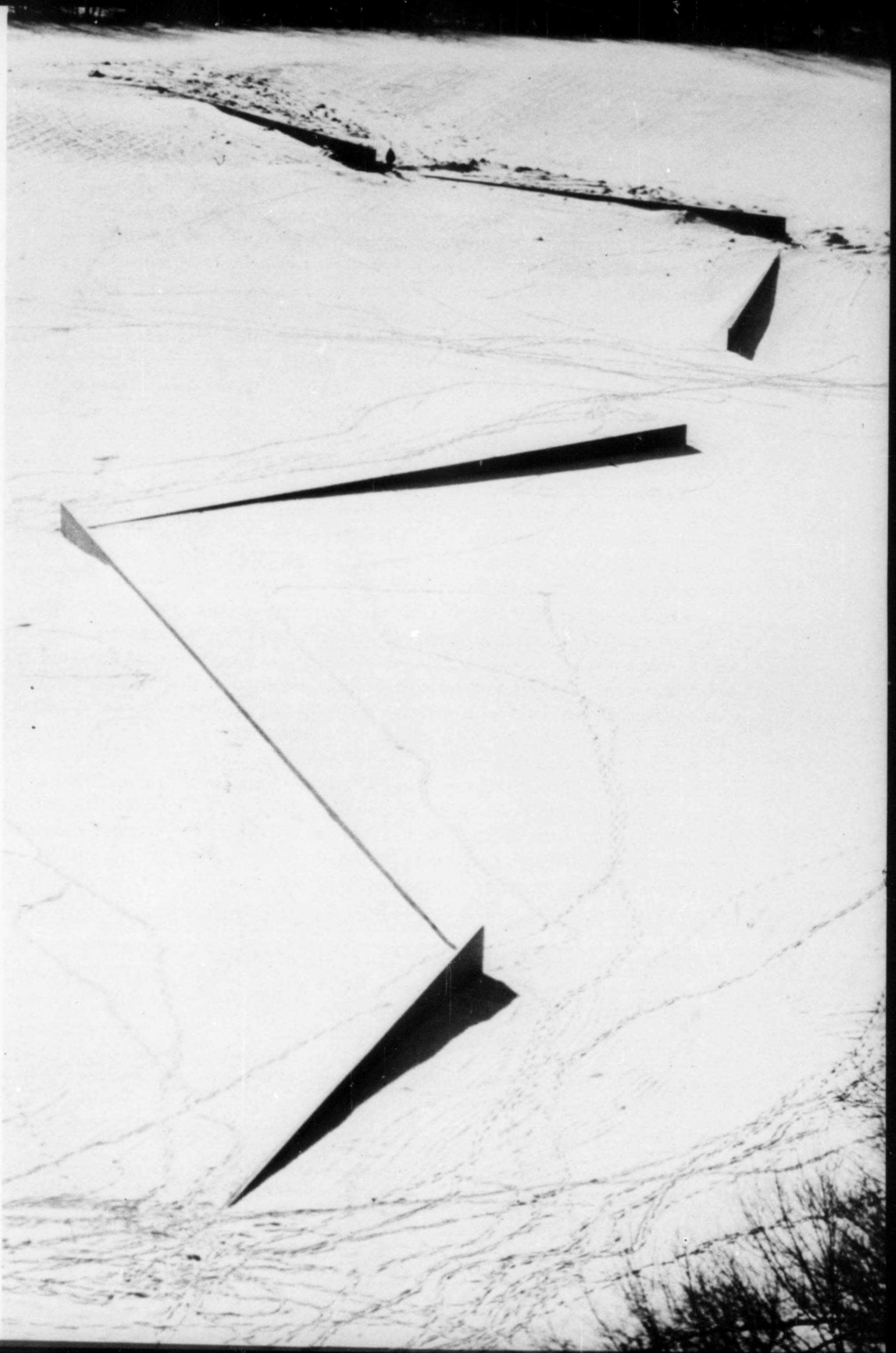
metric surface of a snapshot (we know that he found the movie camera, because it involves motion, to be a more suitable means for conveying the *Spiral Jetty*), but this animosity toward aerial photography plunges us into the very heart of the experience of the picturesque. Why this animosity? Because aerial photography produces a "Gestalt reading" of the operation, and reconstructs the work as the indifferent realization of a compositional *a priori* (Serra goes so far as to say that it is a kind of professional distortion peculiar to photography: "Most photographs take their cues from advertising, where the priority is high image content for an easy Gestalt reading" [p. 170]). Now all of Serra's oeuvre signals a desire to escape from the theory of "good form" (and from the opposition, on which it plays, between figure and background). Notice what he says about the *Rotary Arc*: no one who circumnavigates this sculpture, whether on foot or by car, "can ascribe the multiplicity of views to a Gestalt reading of the Arc. Its form remains ambiguous, indeterminable, unknowable as an entity" (p. 161). The multiplicity of views is what is destroyed by aerial photography (a theological point of view par excellence), and the multiplicity of views is the question opened by the picturesque, its knot of contradiction.

"I wasn't sure what he was talking about. He wasn't talking about the form of the work. But I guess he meant that one experienced the landscape as picturesque through the work" (p. 181). Serra's interpretation of Smithson's remarks is based on one of the commonplaces of the theory of the picturesque garden: not to force nature, but to reveal the "capacities" of the site, while magnifying their variety and singularity. This is exactly what Serra does: "The site is redefined not re-presented. . . . The placement of all structural elements in the open field draws the viewer's attention to the topography of the landscape as the landscape is walked."² As early as *Shift*, and then in connection with all his landscape sculptures, Serra has insisted on the discovery by the spectator, while walking within the sculpture, of the formless nature of the terrain: the sculptures "point to the indeterminacy of the landscape. The sculptural elements act as barometers for reading the landscape."³ Or again: "The dialectic of walking and looking into the landscape establishes the sculptural experience" (p. 72).

I believe, however, that there is more than that in Smithson's remark, and that this remark clarifies all of Serra's work since 1970, that is, ever since he took an interest, starting with a trip to Japan where for six weeks he admired the Zen gardens of Myoshin-ji, in deambulatory space and peripatetic vision. All of Serra's sculpture, meaning not only his landscape sculptures, but also the sculptures erected in an urban setting and those he executes in an architectural interior. Indeed, although Serra himself makes a very clear distinction between these three types of sculpture—noting, for example, that while in his urban

2. Richard Serra, "Notes from Sight Point Road," *Perspecta* No. 19, Cambridge, The M.I.T. Press, 1982, p. 180.

3. Richard Serra and Peter Eisenman, "Interview," *Skyline*, April 1983, p. 16.



works the internal structure responds to external conditions, as in his landscape works, "ultimately the attention is refocused on the sculpture itself" (p. 181)—all his work is based on the destruction of notions of identity and causality, and all of it can be read as an extension of what Smithson says about the picturesque: "The picturesque, far from being an inner movement of the mind, is based on real land; it precedes the mind in its material external existence. We cannot take a one-sided view of the landscape within this dialectic. A park can no longer be seen as 'a thing-in-itself,' but rather as a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region—the park becomes a 'thing-for-us.'"⁴ Despite what he says about it, all of Serra's work is based on the deconstruction of such a notion as "sculpture itself." This is how Rosalind Krauss describes the relations between Serra's oeuvre and Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*;⁵ in order to describe in a different way the "identity crisis" operating in Serra's sculpture, I should like to stick to the notion of the picturesque, which, I might add, could only have been developed (in the eighteenth century, in England) after the critique of the relation of causality formulated by Hume, that forefather of modern phenomenology.

What does Smithson say? That the picturesque park is not the transcription on the land of a compositional pattern previously fixed in the mind, that its effects cannot be determined *a priori*, that it presupposes a stroller, someone who trusts more in the real movement of his legs than in the fictive movement of his gaze. This notion would seem to contradict the pictorial origin of the picturesque, as set forth by a large number of theoretical and practical treatises (the garden conceived as a picture *seen* from the house or as a sequence of small views—pauses—arranged along the path where one strolls). Even further, it implies that a fundamental break with pictorialism is put in place, most often unbeknown to its theoreticians, and in my opinion, Serra's art, more than two centuries later, furnishes the most striking manifestation of this break.

How does Serra work?

The site determines how I think about what I am going to build, whether it be an urban or landscape site, a room or other architectural enclosure. Some works are realized from their inception to their completion totally at the site. Other pieces are worked out in the studio. Having a definite notion of the actual site, I experiment with steel models in a large sandbox. The sand, functioning as a ground plane or as a surrogate elevation, enables me to shift the building elements so as to understand their sculptural capacity. The

4. Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt, New York, New York University Press, 1979, p. 119.

5. Rosalind Krauss, "Abaisser, étendre, contracter, comprimer, tourner: regarder l'oeuvre de Richard Serra," *Richard Serra*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983, pp. 29-35.

building method is based on hand manipulation. A continuous hands-on procedure both in the studio and at the site, using full-scale mock-ups, models, etc., allows me to perceive structures I could not imagine.⁶

Or again: "I never make sketches or drawings for sculptures. I don't work from an a priori concept or image" (p. 146).

In short, *Serra does not start with a plan*, he does not draw on a sheet of paper the geometric figure to be delineated by the aerial view of his sculpture. This does not mean that there are no drawings: they are done later (the Kröller-Müller museum owns a very "pictorial" drawing done by Serra *from Spin Out* and *after Spin Out* had been executed). It does not mean that there are no plans: these are the business of the engineers and of the firm that will carry out the material execution of the sculpture; they are the translation, *a posteriori* and into their own codes, of the elevation projected by Serra: "When you are building a 100-ton piece [the approximate weight of the piece commissioned by the Centre Georges Pompidou], you have to meet codes" (p. 121). Serra does not start from the plan, but rather from the elevation: "Even in pieces low to the ground, I am interested in the specificity of elevation" (p. 50). Now this is precisely where Serra comes together with the theory of the picturesque and where in a certain sense his work is closer to it than Smithson's (whose drawings are often ground plans of his sculptures). For the picturesque is above all a struggle against the reduction "of all terrains to the flatness of a sheet of paper."⁷

It may seem trite to say that a fundamental shift (from plan to elevation) should appear in an art of gardens based, at least in the beginning, on the imitation of the painting of Claude Lorrain or Salvatore Rosa. Indeed, painting, at least until recently, has never confronted the spectator as a horizontal plane⁸ (one might suppose that an art wishing to imitate painting, the verticality of painting, would stress the elevation). It was not, however, something that happened by itself, and one only finds it expressed rather late in the theory of picturesque gardens. It was the Marquis de Girardin, patron of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who first formulated it directly: "What has hitherto most retarded the progress of taste, in buildings as well as in gardens, is the bad practice of catching the effect of the picture in the ground plan instead of catching the ground plan in the effect of the picture."⁹ The artificial arrangements of French

6. Serra, "Notes from Sight Point Road," p. 174.

7. René-Louis de Girardin, *De la composition des paysages* (1777), Editions du Champ urbain, 1979, p. 19.

8. The rupture performed, according to Leo Steinberg, by Rauschenberg (passage from the vertical plane of the painting to the horizontal plane of the "flatbed") precisely matches the one I analyze here, through the picturesque, as performed by Serra in the field of sculpture. As I will shortly do, Steinberg analyzes this pictorial turning point in Rauschenberg as a response to the modernist theories of Clement Greenberg. Cf. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 82-91.

9. Girardin, p. 83.

gardens are condemned because they produce the effect "of a geometric plan, a dessert tray, or a sheet of cut-outs,"¹⁰ as is symmetry because it "is probably born of laziness and vanity. Of vanity in that one has claimed to subject nature to one's house, instead of subjecting one's house to nature; and of laziness in that one has been satisfied to work only on paper, which tolerates everything, in order to spare oneself the trouble of seeing and carefully contriving on the terrain, which tolerates only what suits it."¹¹

But the point is that Girardin is not content with these declarations of intention: he advises apprentice landscape gardeners to place on the site itself *full-sized* models of the various elements that they wish to include in it, "poles stretched with white cloth" for the masses of plants and facades of buildings, and white cloth spread on the ground to represent surfaces of water, "according to the outlines, extent, and position needed to produce the same effect in *nature* as in your picture."¹² In speaking of the architecture of constructions (but this also applies to the other elements), Girardin adds: "In this way, long before building, you will be able to contrive and guarantee the success of your constructions in relation to the various points where they ought to appear, and in relation to their form, their elevation. . . ; by this means you will be able to take into consideration all their relations and their harmony with the surrounding objects."¹³

Of course, there is no question here of reducing Serra's art to the contrivances of an eighteenth-century gentleman farmer, since Girardin's whole vocabulary shows that he clung to a scenographic view of the role of the landscape gardener (for him, groves of trees are stage flats, the surrounding countryside a backdrop). And, of course, no work by Serra seeks to create a picture (the idea of representation is foreign to him). But even though Girardin is content with a pictorial conception of the picturesque (his book is entitled *De la composition des paysages*), and even though the elevation of Girardin's constructions actually remains an illusion, his recommendation to use full-sized models testifies to a very early understanding of what distinguishes size from scale, and this distinction lies at the heart of Serra's interest in the "specificity of elevation."

We have long been aware of Serra's aversion for the monumental works of most contemporary sculptors, as well as his wish to make a sharp distinction between his own work and the production of monuments: "When we look at these pieces, are we asked to give any credence to the notion of a monument? They do not relate to the history of monuments. They do not memorialize anything" (p. 178); finally, we know he is irritated by architects who take only a utilitarian interest in sculpture (to adorn their buildings, to add something

10. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

13. *Ibid.*

soulful to their central banks and multinational headquarters). Serra calls this mediocre urban art, which has invaded our old as well as our modern cities, "piazza art." That he has no fondness for architects is certainly his right: he has often had a bone to pick with them, including one of the Beaubourg architects who suppressed his work.¹⁴ But the chief reproach he directs at them deserves to be noted, for it is the same one that he directs at other creators of monuments, whether they be Moore, Calder, or Noguchi (their works do not have scale, since scale depends on context; only the size of these sculptures is imposing: they are small models enlarged). "Architects suffer from the same studio syndrome. They work out of their offices, terrace the landscape and place their building into the carved-out site. As a result the studio-designed then site-adjusted buildings look like blown-up cardboard models."¹⁵ One can imagine the laughter and disdain of architects for a sculptor who presumes to tell them that they should make full-sized models of their buildings. There was a time when Mondrian, who cared much more for the process than for the plan, wondered how architects could avoid doing so ("how can they solve each new problem *a priori*?"¹⁶). One more difference between our period and Mondrian's lies in the fact that such a proposition would not then have seemed incongruous, and that it was even carried out directly by architects: in 1912, Mies van der Rohe, on the site chosen in The Hague, built a full-sized model (in wood and canvas) from his designs for a large villa for Mme Kröller-Müller; and in Paris in 1922, before Mondrian's very eyes a few months after he had written his text, Mallet-Stevens took the opportunity to erect at the Salon d'Automne at full scale a design for an "Aero-Club Pavilion." One can only say that Serra's sculpture, among other things, is a reminder to architects (a "*rappel à MM. les architectes*," in Le Corbusier's words) of some forgotten truths. The relationship between architecture and Serra's sculpture is one of conflict: he says of his *Berlin Block for Charlie Chaplin*, placed in Mies van der Rohe's National Galerie in Berlin, that it was all done "so that it would contradict the architecture" (p. 127). Furthermore, ever since his first writings, he has insisted on the need to distinguish sculptural problems from architectural ones (pp. 16, 55, 128). And when, having enumerated different qualities of space operating in a number of his sculptures, he is asked where he has found "these concepts of space" (perceptive, behaviorist, psychological, cognitive, etc.), Serra replies: "They were the result of working through various sculptural problems. Some of my concerns may be related to architectonic principles—geometry, engineering, the use of light to define a volume—but the pieces themselves have no utilitar-

14. On this point, see Serra's interview with Douglas Crimp, *Interviews, Etc.*, pp. 172-173.

15. Serra and Eisenman, p. 15.

16. Piet Mondrian, "De realiseering van het neo-plasticisme in verre toekomst en in de huidige architectuur," 2nd part, *De Stijl*, vol. V, no. 5 (May 1922), p. 67. On this point and what it implies in Mondrian's thought, see Yve-Alain Bois, "Du projet au procès," in *L'Atelier de Mondrian*, Paris, Editions Macula, 1982, pp. 34-35.

ian or pragmatic value" (p. 73). In this sentence I read a denial. Not only because architecture—fortunately—does not always limit itself to its "utilitarian or pragmatic value," but especially because the architectonic principles to which Serra refers have nothing, or very little, to do with his work (he even acknowledges his surprise, a few pages earlier in this same interview, at the role played by light inside *Sight Point* in Amsterdam [p. 66]). Serra, therefore, does not wish to be mistaken for an architect. Which does not keep his sculpture from being a lesson in architecture, or a criticism of architecture—something that he ended by admitting when an architect, to be exact, put him on the defensive:

When sculpture . . . leaves the gallery or museum to occupy the same space and place as architecture, when it redefines the space and place in terms of sculptural necessities, architects become annoyed. Not only is their concept of space being changed, but for the most part it is being criticized. The criticism can come into effect only when architectural scale, methods, materials and procedures are being used. Comparisons are provoked. Every language has a structure about which nothing critical in that language can be said. To criticize a language, there must be a second language available dealing with the structure of the first but possessing a new structure.¹⁷

This is exactly the position in which Serra's sculpture finds itself in the presence of modern architecture: the former maintains a connection that allows it to criticize the latter. Both have a common denominator that allows them to communicate.

What is this common element? Serra doesn't say, although all his remarks about his work speak of it implicitly: this element is the play of parallax. "Parallax, from Greek *parallaxis*, 'change,' displacement of the apparent position of a body, due to a change of position of the observer" (Petit Robert dictionary). Serra uses the word only once (about *Spin Out, for Bob Smithson*) (p. 36), but all his descriptions take it into account. See, for example, how *Sight Point* seems at first "to fall right to left, make an X, and straighten itself out to a truncated pyramid. That would occur three times as you walked around" (p. 66). Or again, see how the upper edge of the *Rotary Arc* seems sometimes to curve toward the sky, sometimes toward the ground, how its concavity is curtailed before the moving spectator discovers a convexity whose end he cannot see, how this convexity is then flattened to the point of becoming a barely rounded wall, until this regularity is suddenly broken and in some way turned inside out like a glove when the spectator ascends a flight of steps (pp. 155-161). Other examples could be given; I prefer for the moment to go back to architecture.

In *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture*, Peter Collins sees the new interest in parallax, in the middle of the eighteenth century, as one of the prime sources

17. Serra and Eisenman, p. 15.

for the establishment of modern architectural space. People were interested at first in the illusionistic effects of parallax, hence the proliferation of large mirrors in Rococo salons, and later in architectural effects themselves: these effects did not occur frequently in existing architecture ("Before the mid-eighteenth century, the interior of a building was essentially a kind of box-like enclosure," Collins notes¹⁸), but

they were invariably to be seen in ruins, and this may be one of the reasons why ruins became so popular in that period. Robert Wood, when visiting the ruins of Palmyra in 1751, was as much impressed by their aesthetic as by their archaeological qualities, and remarked that "so great a number of Corinthian columns, mixed with so little wall or solid building, afforded a most romantic variety of prospect." . . . The fondness at this time for multiplying free-standing Classical colonnades inside buildings, as well as outside buildings, may also be explained by the new delight in parallax. Boullée's most grandiose projects were to show many variations on this theme, but it had been exploited as early as 1757 by Soufflot in his great church of Ste. Geneviève. . . . Soufflot had noticed that in the cathedral of Notre-Dame, "the spectator, as he advances, and as he moves away, distinguishes in the distance a thousand objects, at one moment found, at another lost again, offering him delightful spectacles."¹⁹ He therefore attempted to produce the same effect inside of Ste. Geneviève.²⁰

And in a text that Collins mentions without quoting, Soufflot's successor as master builder at Sainte-Geneviève was to say that the chief object of that architect "in building his church, was to combine in one of the most beautiful forms the lightness of construction of Gothic buildings with the purity and magnificence of Greek architecture."²¹

At first sight the interest of a neoclassical architect in Gothic buildings would seem impossibly remote from our subject. The very strangeness of this interest, however, leads directly to it, since, as Collins notes, it is the result of this new taste for parallax that develops in this period. Collins's intuition is confirmed by a supplementary element: on September 6, 1764, on the occasion of the laying of the first stone for Sainte-Geneviève, Julien David Leroy, famous

18. Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1965, p. 26.

19. Jacques-Germain Soufflot, "Mémoire sur l'architecture gothique" (1741), reprinted in Michael Petzet, *Soufflots Sainte-Geneviève und der französische Kirchenbau des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin, 1961, p. 138.

20. Peter Collins, pp. 27-28.

21. Brebion, "Mémoire à M. le Comte de la Billarderie d'Angiviller" (1780), reprinted in Petzet, p. 147. This synthesis of Greek and Gothic was to be exactly the program expounded by Boullée in his famous *Essai sur l'art*.

for *Les ruines des plus beaux monuments de la Grèce*, a work he had published in 1758 and which marked the beginning of the Greek revival, presented a small pamphlet to the king. Now this little book, which ends with a panegyric on Soufflot's future church, is probably the first architectural treatise that "relies on an experimental knowledge of movement in space — *that metaphysical part of architecture*, as Leroy calls it in his letters."²² The hymn to the varied effects produced by a peristyle is even more vibrant in this pamphlet than in his book on ruins, where Leroy had already addressed the question. But I would rather quote a less effusive passage in which Leroy, in order to explain his rejection of pilasters and engaged columns, then a great subject of debate among French architectural theoreticians, brings up the art of gardens. His demonstration is very simple:

If you walk in a garden, at some distance from & along a row of regularly planted trees, all of whose trunks touch a wall pierced with arcades [as engaged columns do], the position of the trees with respect to these arcades will only seem to you to change very imperceptibly, & your soul will experience no new sensation. . . . But if this row of trees stands away from the wall [like a peristyle], while you walk in the same way as before, you will enjoy a new spectacle, because the different spaces in the wall will seem successively to be blocked up by the trees with every step you take.

And Leroy's description becomes surprisingly precise — as precise as the account given by Serra of one of the possible readings of the *Rotary Arc* — for one of the routes he suggests in his promenade: "You will soon see the trees divide the arcades into two equal parts, and a moment later cut them unequally, or leave them entirely exposed & conceal only their intervals; finally, if you approach or move away from these trees, the wall will seem to you to rise up to where their branches begin, or cut their trunks at very different heights." In short, despite the regular arrangement in both cases of tree and wall, "the first of the decorations will seem immobile, while the other, on the contrary, being in some way enlivened by the movement of the spectator, will show him a series of much varied views, which will result from the endless combination that he obtains of the simple objects that produce these views."²³

Of course, the garden described by Leroy has nothing picturesque about it; what is picturesque is the importance accorded to the movement of the spectator, since it corresponds to that fundamental rule that Uvedale Price, one of the theoreticians cited by Smithson, called "intricacy." Indeed, for Price, the

22. Richard Etlin, "Grandeur et décadence d'un modèle: l'église Sainte-Geneviève et les changements de valeur esthétique au XVIII^e siècle," in *Soufflot et l'architecture des lumières*, proceedings of a conference held in Lyons in 1980, supplement to nos. 6-7 of *Cahiers de la Recherche Architecturale*, 1980, p. 30. I am wholly indebted to this text for having put me on Leroy's track.

23. Julien David Leroy, *Histoire de la disposition et des formes différentes que les chrétiens ont données à leurs temples, depuis le règne de Constantin le Grand, jusqu'à nous*, Paris, 1764, pp. 56-57.

first so-called English gardens were not picturesque enough, for they neglected "two of the most fruitful sources of human pleasures: . . . *variety* . . . [and] *intricacy*, a quality which, though distinct from variety, is so connected and blended with it that one can hardly exist without the other. According to the idea I have formed of it," Price adds, "intricacy in landscape might be defined, that disposition of objects which, by a partial and uncertain concealment, excites and nourishes curiosity."²⁴

To be sure, as Collins points out, theoreticians of the picturesque have never been able to extricate themselves from a veritable malaise engendered by a contradiction in their theory, by their stubborn determination to treat the scenic garden (promenade, temporal experience) and landscape painting as though they were one and the same thing.²⁵ Some, however, were aware of this contradiction, and it even became a stumbling block in their polemics. See Repton, responding to Price: "The spot from whence the view is taken is in a fixed state to the painter, but the gardener surveys his scenery while in motion."²⁶ Now it was the discovery of the play of parallax that made them specify the terms of the contradiction (static optical view/peripatetic view). Furthermore, it is in connection with architecture, the perception of architecture, that it appears most acutely in their texts:

Avoid a straight avenue directed upon a dwelling-house; better for an oblique approach is a waving line. . . . In a direct approach, the first appearance is continued to the end. . . . In an oblique approach, the interposed objects put the house seemingly in motion: it moves with the passenger . . . seen successively in different directions, [it] assumes at each step a new figure.²⁷

In short, despite the "pictorial" bias, it is necessary to break the assurance of the organ of vision, eliminate the presumption of "Gestalt," and recall to the spectator's body, its indolence and weight, its material existence: "The foot should never travel to [the object] by the same path which the eye has travelled over before. Lose the object, and draw nigh obliquely."²⁸ This is the great innovation contained in embryo in the picturesque garden:

The Classical notion of design, whether in gardens or buildings, regarded the totality of such schemes as forming a single unified and immediately intelligible composition, of which the elements were

24. Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque, as compared with the sublime and the beautiful*, London, J. Mawman, 1810. Quoted and translated in the anthology entitled *Art et Nature en Grand-Bretagne au XVIII^e siècle*, by Marie-Madeleine Martinet, Paris, Aubier, 1980, p. 249.

25. Peter Collins, p. 54.

26. Humphry Repton, *The Art of Landscape Gardening* (1794), Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1907. Quoted in Martinet, p. 243.

27. Henry Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (1762), quoted in Martinet, p. 171.

28. Shenstone, *Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening* (1764), quoted in Martinet, p. 12.

subdivisions constituting smaller but still harmoniously related parts, [the picturesque garden was] on the contrary, designed in accordance with a diametrically opposite intention, for here the overall concept was carefully hidden.²⁹

Now if I said before that Serra's sculpture was a "reminder to architects," it is precisely because modern architecture was born of this rupture (analyzed by Collins in connection with gardens)—a rupture that architects themselves, perhaps under the influence of certain theoreticians, have almost completely repressed. In his short book on modern architecture, Vincent Scully raises at the outset (but one swallow doesn't make a summer) the question of the rupture: it is first of all necessary, he says, to "travel backward in time until we reach a chronological point where we can no longer identify the architecture as an image of the modern world."³⁰ And this point of rupture is situated in the middle of the eighteenth century (it is surely not by chance that it exactly coincides with the war conducted by the English garden against the symmetry of the garden *à la française*): taking issue with Sigfried Giedion, Scully shows that Baroque space (i.e., the architectural space that comes prior to this point of rupture) is in no way the antecedent of modern space, and that modern space is its negation. In the Baroque,

order is absolutely firm, but against it an illusion of freedom is played. . . . It is therefore an architecture that is intended to enclose and shelter human beings in a psychic sense, to order them absolutely so that they can always find a known conclusion at the end of any journey, but finally to let them play at freedom and action all the while. Everything works out; the play seems tumultuous but nobody gets hurt and everyone wins. It is . . . a maternal architecture, and creates a world with which, today, only children, if they are lucky, could identify.³¹

Who brought about the rupture? asks Scully. It was Piranesi in his *Carceri*: "In them, the symmetry, hierarchy, climax, and emotional release of Baroque architectural space . . . were cast aside in favor of a complex spatial wandering, in which the objectives of the journey were not revealed and therefore could not be known."³² Although one of the sources of the picturesque, Piranesi's art participates in the rupture that goes well beyond the picturesque that succeeds it. And if Serra, because of the connotations of delicacy attached to this term *picturesque*, balked at its use to characterize his sculpture, I would say that in a certain sense he was right, for his art is the first response in sculptural space to the

29. Peter Collins, p. 53.

30. Vincent Scully Jr., *Modern Architecture*, New York, Braziller, 1965, p. 10.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

questions raised about representational space more than two centuries ago by Piranesi.

The first point in common between the Venetian's engravings and Serra's work: space in them is not maternal, that is to say, it is not oriented, not centered.³³ There are indeed *some* axes in Piranesi's engravings, but as Ulya Vogt-Göknil has remarked, they are always multiple and either run parallel or mutually exclude each other.³⁴ Serra: "The work is not goal-oriented."³⁵ Or again, "the center, or the question of centering, is dislocated from the physical center of the work and found in a moving center" (p. 33). Or finally: "The expanse of the work allows one to perceive and locate a multiplicity of centers" (*ibid.*).

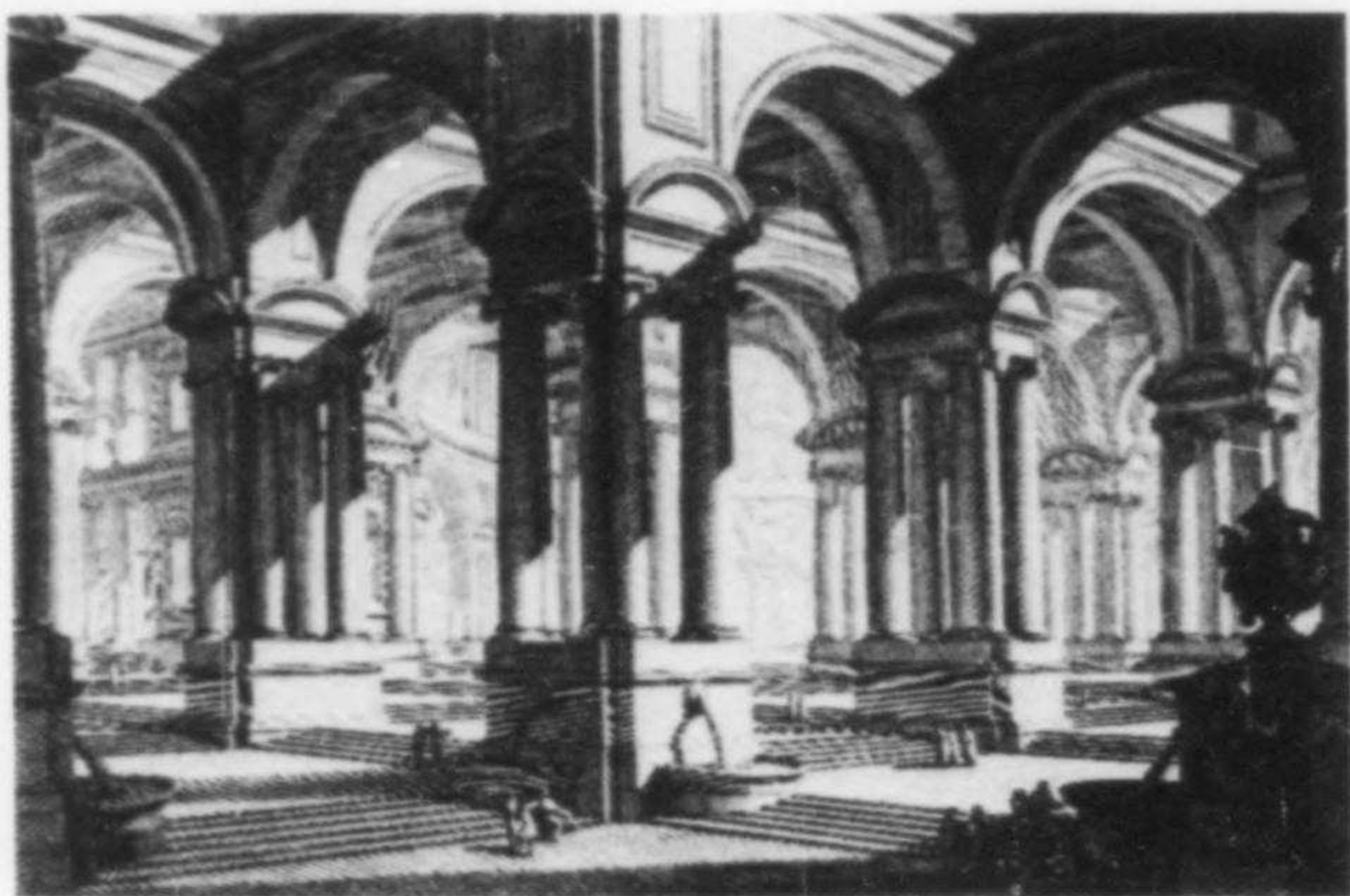
Another feature in common, which, as we have seen, was contained in embryo in the picturesque: both Piranesi's work and Serra's are based on the abolition of the prerogative of the plan. Let us dwell for a moment on the famous *Prima Parte di Architettura e Prospettive*, and look at plate 11 of that work, entitled "*Gruppo di Scale ornato di magnifica Architettura, le quali stanno disposte in modo che conducano a varii piani, e specialmente ad una Rotonda che serve per rappresentanze teatrali.*" Who of us, having been shown this image (elevation) and its title (isn't a rotunda circular, and doesn't it presuppose a completed geometrical space?), could have imagined that the floor plan, as patiently reconstituted by Ulya Vogt-Göknil, would turn out to be so architecturally formless, an apology for the fragment right there on the plan. It is as though Piranesi had not simply been content to break existing architectural rules (by the eccentric points of view adopted in his *vedute*), but had surreptitiously destroyed, *in the very elevations*, the identity of the plan. Now this is one of the essential strengths of Serra's sculpture. Clara Weyergraf has remarked about *Terminal*, a sculpture that stands today in Bochum and is related in principle to the one that Serra is in the process of constructing in La Défense, that "the information gathered from the construction drawings . . . cannot be verified in the experience of the sculpture."³⁶ And indeed the square opening of light that the spectator finds above him when he enters the sculpture cannot be inferred from his previous walk around the work (just as it is impossible for him to know, at any particular moment, that "*Terminal* is made of four trapezoidal slabs of steel of the same size" [*ibid.*], something specifically revealed by the construction drawings). The elevation cannot provide the plan, for as one walks around it, one finds no element that

33. "The child's visual space is centered, inhabited by the body charged with libidinal interest from the mother. This space may be 'depopulated' and the boundaries where it loses itself become fascinating with their insecurity, their flow, their lack of guideposts, their boundless opening for the view, by a sort of extrusion of the gaze." Guy Rosolato, "Destinations du corps," *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, Spring 1971, p. 12.

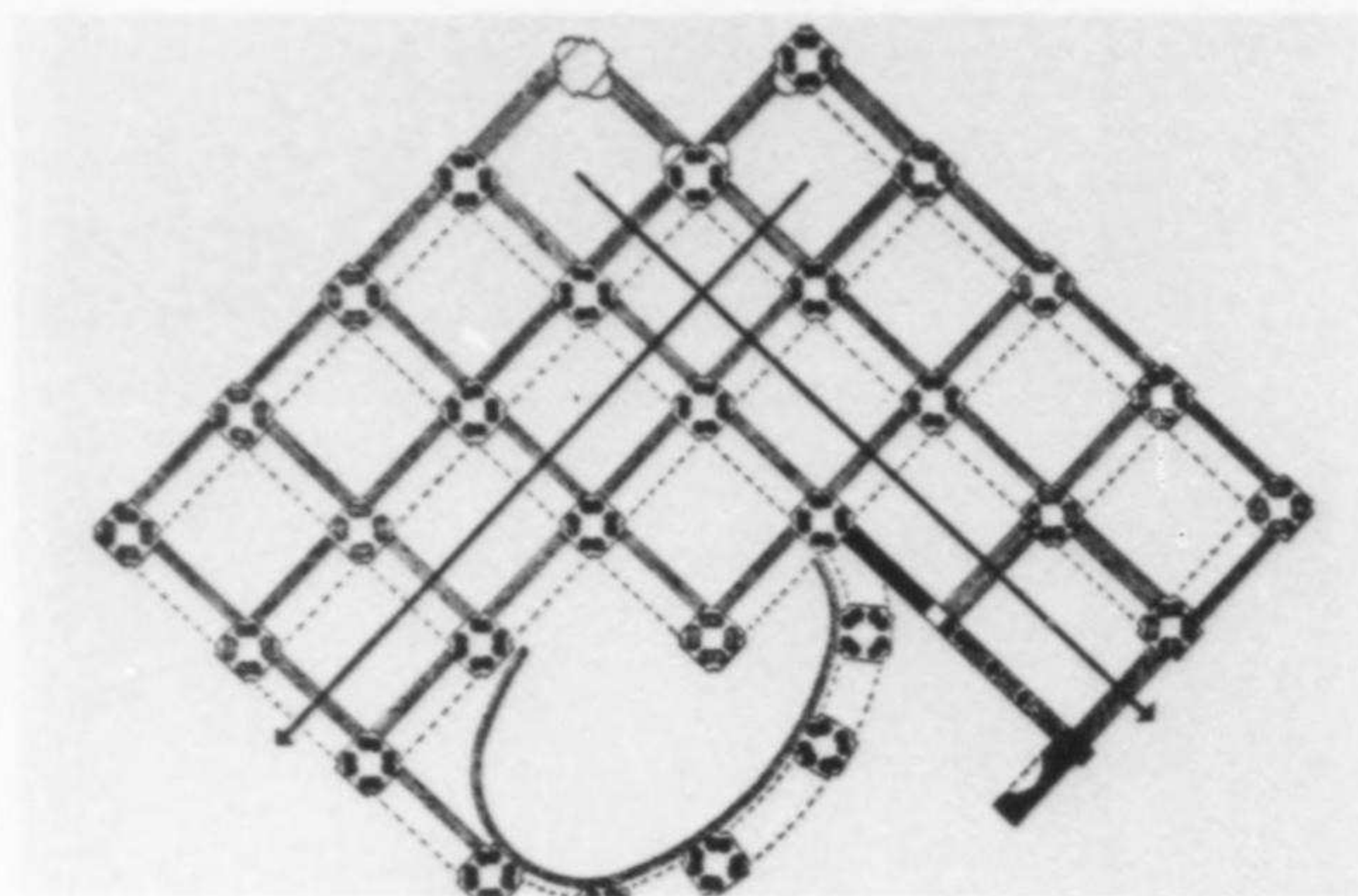
34. Ulya Vogt-Göknil, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: Carceri*, Zurich, Origo Verlag, p. 21.

35. Serra, "Notes from Sight Point Road," p. 173.

36. Clara Weyergraf, "From 'Trough Pieces' to 'Terminal,' Study of a Development," in *Richard Serra*, catalogue published by the museums of Tübingen and Baden-Baden, 1978, p. 214.



Piranesi. *Prima Parte di Architettura e Prospettive*, plate 11.

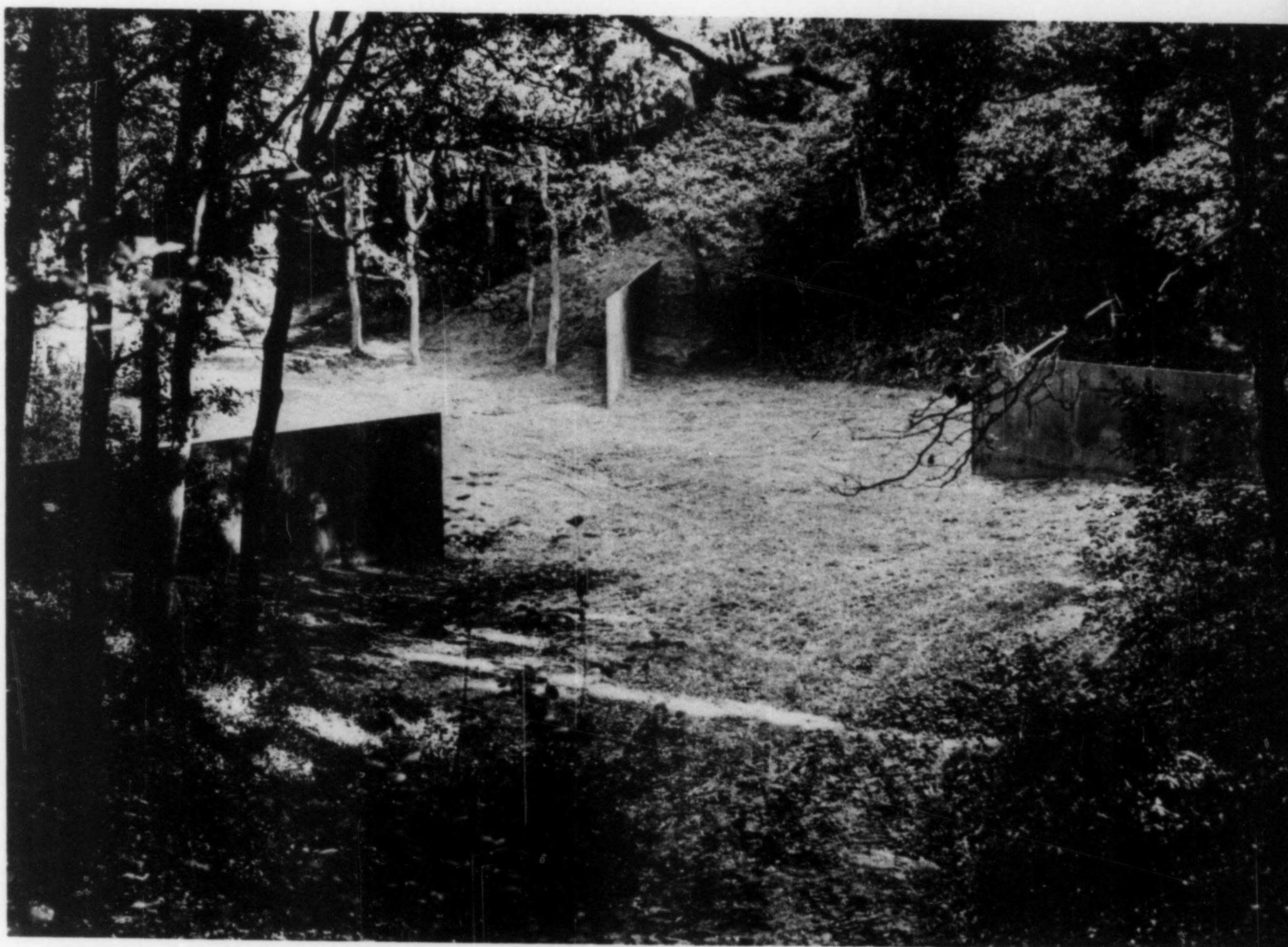


Reconstruction by Ulya Vogt-Göknil of plate 11.

has maintained a relation of identity with the others: "The decision to break with the expectations about the sequentialness of like elements make [*sic*] a dialectical relationship between inside and outside" (p. 86). *Terminal* is in some way a critique of the "narrative" space developed by *Sight Point* (three times three consecutive "views" when one walks around the sculpture), for the number of views of it cannot be counted. But Piranesi's principle of disjunction was already at work in *Sight Point*: even though this sculpture is constructed on a series of similar elements, nothing acts to forewarn the observer that it is, in Serra's words, a "truncated pyramid" delineating an equilateral triangle at its top. Or again, when Serra, with some reluctance, describes the placing of the three steel slabs of *Spin Out* in geometric terms, he says nothing about what the spectator's experience will be: he pretends to give a key to that experience, and this key is not the right one: "The plates were laid out at twelve, four and eight o'clock in an elliptical valley, and the space in between them forms an isosceles triangle" (p. 36). I have spent some time surveying *Spin Out*, trying in particular to determine whether some sort of geometry was at work there, and never was I able to come to that conclusion (on the contrary, it seemed to me that any *a priori* geometry was absent and that the work, like *Shift*, was a function of the topography). And Serra is right to express his reservations and prefer to speak of the work in terms of parallax and the progress of the spectator, since in no way does he work with a view to the recognition of a geometric form in his sculpture—he does not work, as he puts it, "for the sake of anything in that way" (p. 36).

The elevation does not provide the plan, and the plan cannot provide the elevation. Had it been erected in the place for which it was conceived, the piece commissioned by the Centre Georges Pompidou would have been the radical confirmation of this fundamental division. Because the work would have been placed in the pit of the Centre's entrance hall, the spectators would have had

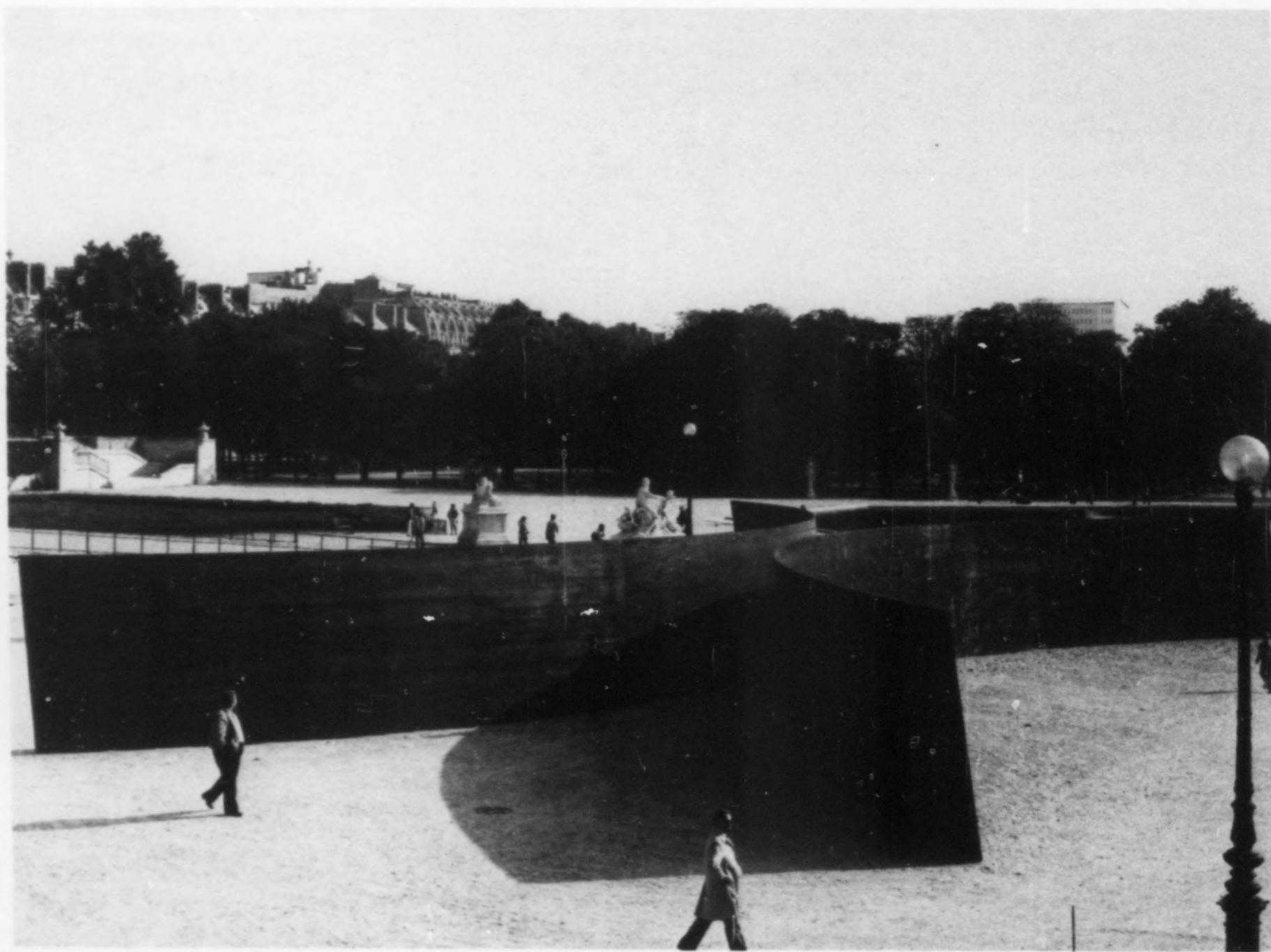
Richard Serra. Spin Out (for Robert Smithson). 1973.

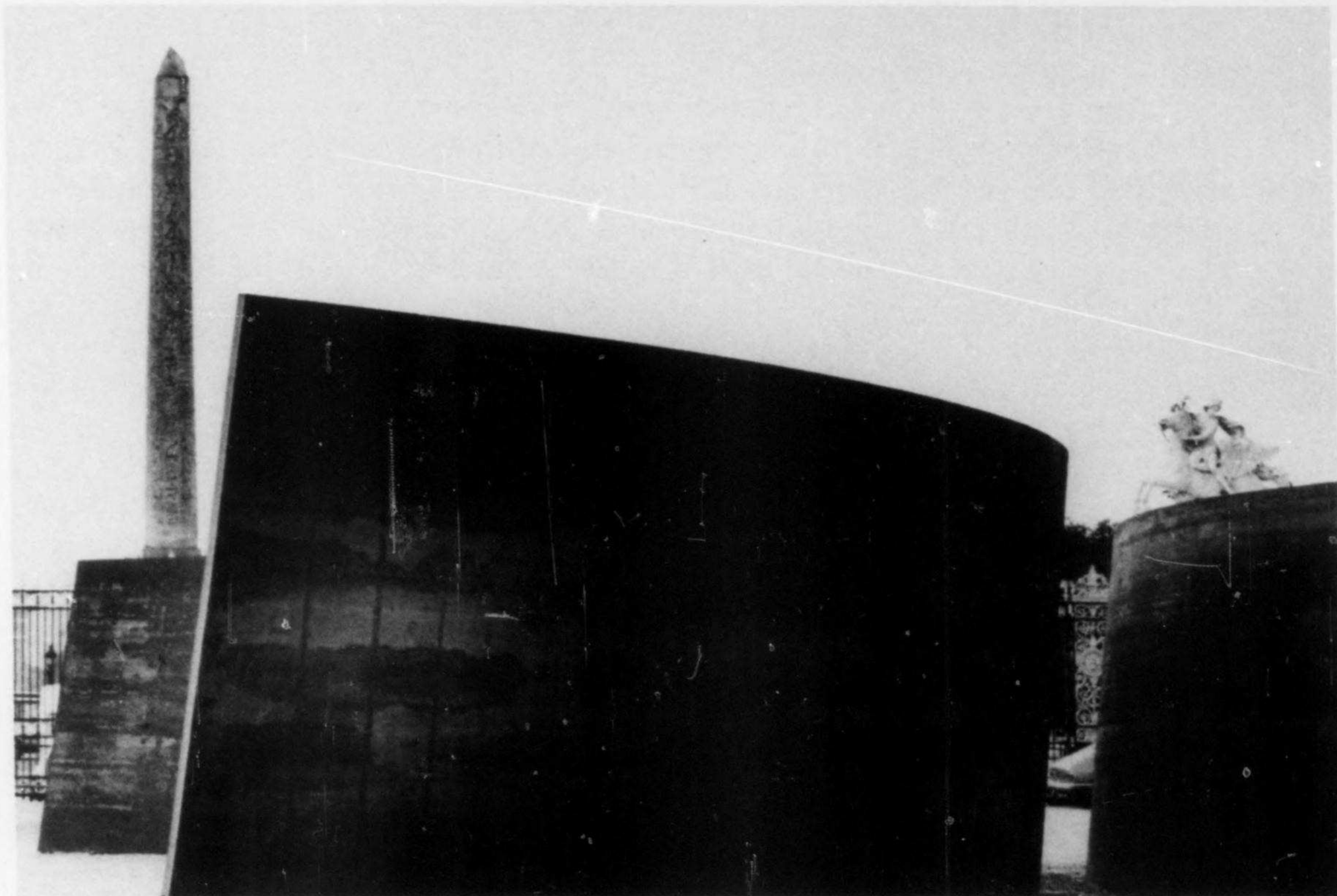


from the outset an inkling of the plan in its symmetry (two equal arcs of a circle arranged as an X, one opposite the other): they would have first seen the work from above, and even if their view would not have been exactly aerial, let us say that their first apprehension of *Clara-Clara* would have been a "Gestalt" one. But this view would have been false. And it is fortunate that in the site actually occupied by the work at the time of its exhibition, between the Musée du Jeu de Paume and the Orangerie, something of this initial false impression can continue to exist, thanks to the sloping partitions that overhang the sculpture on each side. So at the Tuileries, as would have been the case at the Centre Georges Pompidou, the spectator of *Clara-Clara* had knowledge of the overall plan of the sculpture before going up to look at it more closely.

Geometrically, the two arcs of a circle are two identical segments of a section of a *cone* (and not of a cylinder), which means that the curved walls of these arcs are not vertical — the first fact that the plan doesn't tell us. Since the arcs

Richard Serra. Clara-Clara. 1983.





Richard Serra. Clara-Clara. 1983.

are placed not parallel but opposite to each other (their convexity almost meeting in the middle), one logical conclusion would be to have the walls each lean in the opposite direction, each toward the inside of its own curve. But Serra's invention—the second element not apparent from the plan—lies in having broken this symmetry by using what forms the top of one of these arcs as the base for the other—in other words, in having put one of them upside down. Thanks to this reversal, the two walls lean in the same direction (one toward the inside of its curve, the other toward the outside), and this will increase, as one can imagine, the play of parallax. In walking inside *Clara-Clara*, going toward the bottleneck that these two arcs form at their middle, the spectator constantly has the strange impression that one wall goes “faster” than the other, that the right and left sides of his body are not synchronized. Having passed through the bottleneck, which reveals to him the reason for his strange feeling—although the slant of the walls is actually rather slight—he then sees the lateral differences reversed: the symmetry of this effect is foreseeable, but not the surprise that accompanies it.

To get back to Piranesi: William Chambers, one of the first theoreticians of the English garden and a critic of Price, reports that "when the students at the Académie de France in Rome accused [Piranesi] of being ignorant of the art of plans, he produced one of extreme complexity."³⁷ This *Pianta di ampio magnifico Collegio*, the only plan in Piranesi's oeuvre, is first of all a critique of the Baroque tradition. "The most singular feature," writes Monique Mosser, "may be the effort made by Piranesi to develop at the same time two ideas that are difficult to reconcile [I would say mutually exclusive]: that of a building with a central plan and that of the staircase as the dominant motif."³⁸ What Piranesi actually does in response to the students' accusation is to compose, to be sure, a centered plan, but this center, on the one hand, is considerably smaller than the rooms at the periphery (especially those at the four corners); on the other hand, *it is nothing but a thoroughfare*: its sole function is to provide access to eight staircases. From such a plan, swarming with useless and redundant stairways, which are conceived as elevation sections leading nowhere, from this falsely circular structure (going up/down/up), one can infer nothing but an endless rotary and vertical circulation. The center is a thoroughfare: as Ulya Vogt-Göknil had seen, this is the essential nature of Piranesi's architectural space — whether it be the space represented in the *Carceri*, of the *vedute* he provided of the Roman architecture he had before his eyes, or again of this school design.³⁹ The center is a thoroughfare, i.e., an indifferent place, with no other identity than the one conferred on it by the passersby, a nonplace that exists only by the experience of time and motion that the stroller may make of it. In a certain way, Piranesi can be understood to foreshadow not only the space of Serra's sculpture, but that of all modern sculpture as well. For, as Rosalind Krauss has shown, this space, from Rodin to Serra, is one of passage and displacement from the center, a space interrupted by the discontinuous time of involuntary memory, a slender space whose divergences it is up to the spectator to explore, while eventually connecting its threads for himself.⁴⁰

In speaking of *Shift*, Krauss compares Serra's sculpture to Kuleshov's famous experiments in montage. In these experiments, the montage was revealed as an "index of difference or separateness within a prevailing matrix of sameness."⁴¹ Kuleshov's montage demonstrated the perceptive primacy of spatial continuity, but at the same time expressed the fact that this continuity was *pro-*

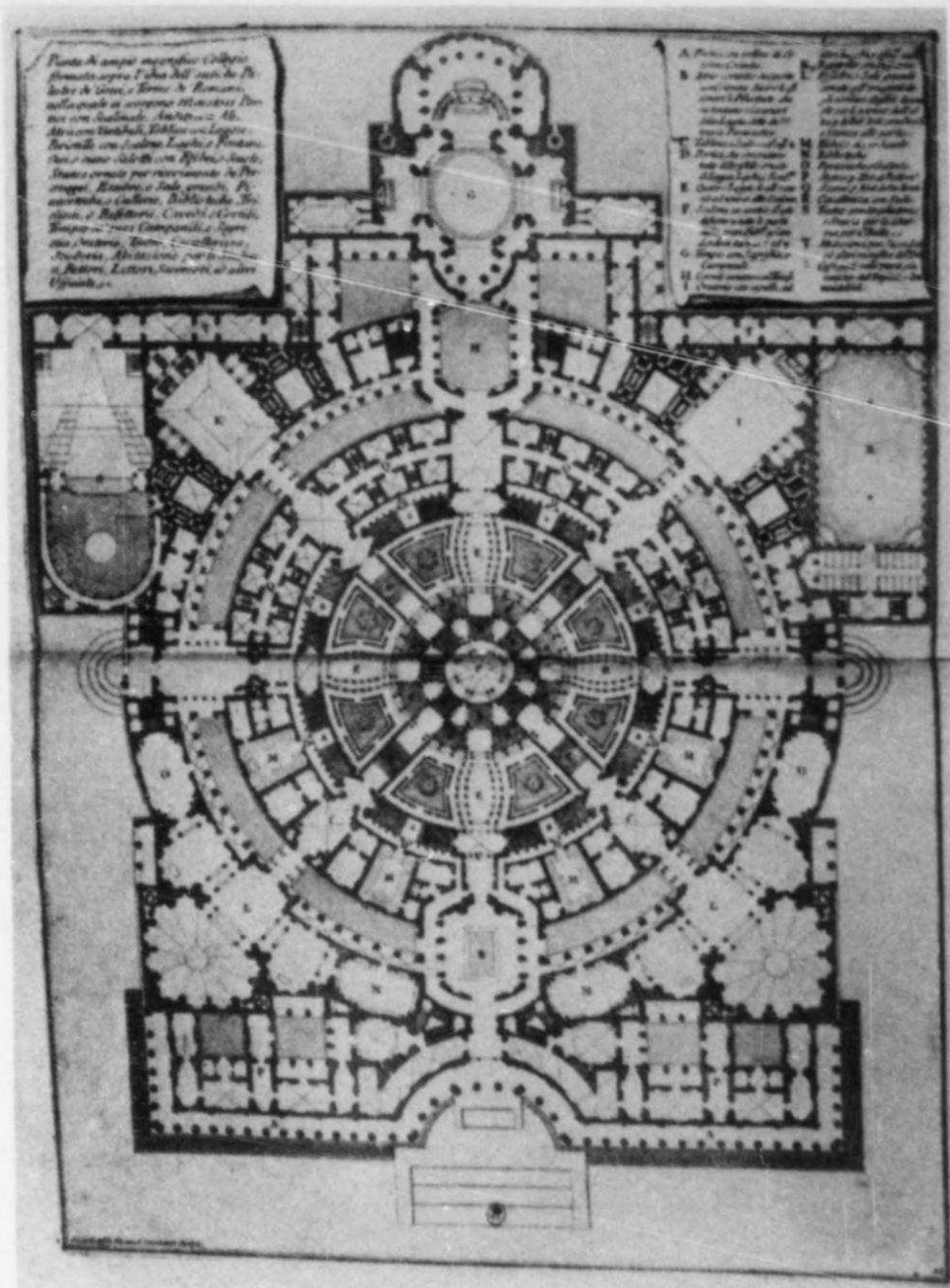
37. Quoted by Monique Mosser in the catalogue of the exhibition *Piranèse et les Français* (Villa Medici, Rome, and Hôtel de Sully, Paris), 1976, p. 287.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

39. Vogt-Göknil, pp. 22-23.

40. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, New York, Viking Press, 1977, *passim*. See especially pp. 280-287, where the question of the "passage" in Serra is directly examined. See also my review of this book, "Opacités de la sculpture," *Critique*, no. 381 (February 1979).

41. Krauss, "Richard Serra: Sculpture Redrawn," *Artforum*, May 1972, p. 38.



Piranesi. *Opere Varie*, plate 22: Pianta di ampio magnifico Collegio.

duced by means of discontinuity. This is exactly what Serra accomplishes in *Shift* and in many other sculptures as well.

One has only to reread the pages Serra has written on the *Rotary Arc* to be convinced that film fragmentation is an apt metaphor by which to describe his work: "Driving around the Rotary, both the Arc's convexity and concavity foreshorten, then compress, overlap, and elongate. The abrupt but continuous succession of views is highly transitive, akin to a cinematic experience" (pp. 155-156). The "transitivity" to which Serra here refers is the notion that he tried to work out his first films (an action perpetuated on an object, with no conclusion), in the sculptures in the *Skullcracker Series* (1969), and which he expressed in the simplest way of all by inscribing a list of verbs on the invitation announcement for one of his first exhibitions.⁴² Now this very transitivity was discovered by Eisenstein in Piranesi when to the space in the *Carceri* he compared the sequence from *October* in which "one and the same piece showing the ascent of the head of state up the marble staircase of the Winter Palace has been cemented together in succession 'ad infinitum.' Of course, not really 'ad infinitum,' but in the course

42. On this subject, see Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, pp. 272-276.

of the four or five variants in which this same scene was shot, which during the actual shooting was intended to be a very luxurious . . . episode."⁴³ Naturally the filmmaker's intention was ironical (to show that Kerensky's irresistible rise to power was built on sand), but that is not important here, since montage can express whatever it likes with "one and the same shot." What matters, on the one hand, is that this description of an almost endless repetition of the same gesture with no conclusion (climbing stairs for no other reason than to climb stairs) exactly matches the repetitive nonevent of Serra's first film, *Hand Catching Lead* (a hand tries to catch some falling pieces of lead, sometimes does catch one, and immediately lets it go: there is no "climax," no orgiastic release, as there is in the Baroque).⁴⁴ What matters, on the other hand, is that Eisenstein discovers this transitivity in Piranesi's work. Not only through the theme of an endless climbing of stairs (a romantic interpretation of the *Carceri*, and one that is a commonplace since the famous passage in De Quincey, quoted by the Soviet director⁴⁵), but especially because in his opinion Piranesi works like a master of montage and bases his spatial continuities on discontinuity:

Nowhere in the *Carceri* do we find a view in depth in continuous perspective. Everywhere the movement begun by a perspective in depth finds itself interrupted by a bridge, a pillar, an arch, a passageway. Each time, beyond the pillar or the semicircle of the arch, the movement of the perspective is once more resumed. . . . [But while] the eye expects to see behind the arch the continuation of the architectural theme preceding the arch normally reduced by perspective, [it is, in fact] another architectural motif that appears behind the arch, and moreover, in a reduction of perspective almost double what the eye had supposed. . . . Hence an unexpected qualitative leap from the space and the grand scale. And the series of planes in depth, cut off from each other by pillars and arches, is constructed in independent portions of autonomous spaces, being connected not by a single continuity of perspective, but as in the successive shocks of spaces of a qualitative intensity differing in depth.

This, says Eisenstein, is exactly the way montage operates in the cinema:

This effect [in Piranesi] is constructed on the capacity of our eye to continue by inertia a movement once it has been given. *The collision of this "suggested" path of movement with another path substituted for it also*

43. S. M. Eisenstein, "Piranesi, or the Fluidity of Forms," trans. Roberta Reeder, in *Oppositions* 11 (Winter 1977), p. 103.

44. Cf. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, pp. 243-244. The analysis of *Hand Catching Lead* opens the chapter on the development of sculpture since the late 1960s.

45. On the passage in the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* devoted to Piranesi and his influence on romanticism, cf. Luzius Keller, *Piranèse et les romantiques français: Le mythe des escaliers en spirale*, José Corti, 1966, passim.

produces the effect of a jolt. It is on the analogous ability of retaining imprints of a visual impression that the phenomenon of cinematic movement is built.⁴⁶

Serra says somewhere (I have been unable to locate the exact wording) that he is interested in abrupt discontinuities: no doubt "the experience of shock," elsewhere described by Walter Benjamin as the experience par excellence of modernism, is what gives rise to his sculpture. As though echoing Eisenstein, he speaks of "memory and anticipation" as "vehicles of perception" for his sculptures,⁴⁷ both of them being dialectically opposed in order to prevent "good form," a "Gestalt" image, or a pattern of identity from taking over. One might say a good deal more about the relations between Eisenstein's montage and the art of Serra. We know that Eisenstein disagreed with Kuleshov (and others) on one fundamental point: he did not want montage, the experience of shock, to involve only "the element between shots," but wanted it to be "transferred to *inside* the fragment, into the elements included in the image itself"⁴⁸ — so that the dissociation between the shots would end by operating in the very interior of the shot, just as Piranesi's disjunction of plan and elevation surreptitiously destroyed the identity of the ground plan and its traditional domination over traditional space. Serra shares with Eisenstein this wish to introduce discontinuity into discontinuity itself, and this takes us back for one last time to the question of the picturesque. We have seen that *Terminal* constituted a sort of deconstruction of the narrative space created by *Sight Point*. Now the problem of narration unquestionably lies at the heart of Serra's enterprise: in his films as in his sculptures, he seeks to destroy that which has been the age-old foundation of narration, namely its conclusion. *Hand Catching Lead* is almost endless, "not actually endless, of course," as Eisenstein would say, but almost. And the descriptive account of his walk or drive around the *Rotary Arc* describes a complete circle: it begins and ends at an arbitrarily chosen — almost arbitrarily chosen — point, and could perpetuate itself indefinitely. When Peter Eisenman spoke of his sculptures as "framing the landscape," Serra bridled:

If you use the word "frame" in referring to the landscape, you imply a notion of the picturesque. I have never really found the notion of framing parts of the landscape particularly interesting in terms of its potential for sculpture. Smithson was interested in the picturesque. . . . That's an interesting notion in terms of its relation to the narrative of seeing but it's not of particular concern to me.⁴⁹

46. Eisenstein, pp. 105–106.

47. Serra, "Notes from Sight Point Road," p. 180.

48. Quoted by Roland Barthes in "The Third Meaning," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 67.

49. Serra and Eisenman, pp. 16–17.

I noted above this pictorial limitation of the theory of the picturesque, which made gardeners develop in their parks a series of small pictures to be discovered while walking. It is to this narrative conception of discontinuity that Serra is opposed, and it is this, more than anything else, that separates him from the picturesque. In December 1782, Hannah More reported to her sisters a conversation she had had with Capability Brown, the first great master of the English picturesque garden:

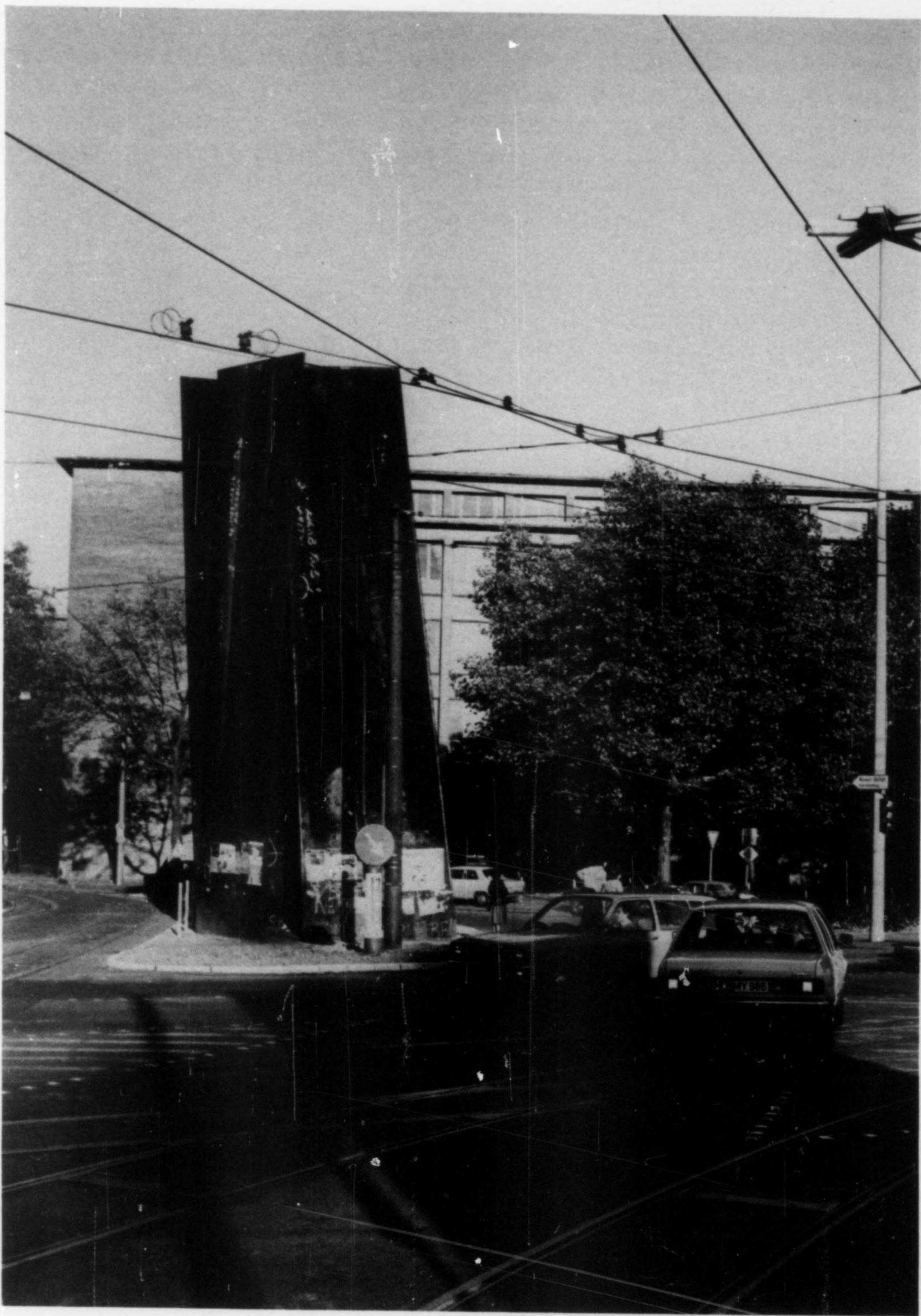
He told me he compared his art to literary composition: "Now *there*," said he, pointing his finger, "I make a comma, and *there*," pointing to another spot, "where a more decided turn is needed, I make a colon; at another part, where an interruption is desirable to break the view, a parenthesis; now a full stop, and then I begin another subject."⁵⁰

This, among other things, is what distinguishes Serra's art from that of landscape gardeners: he has no full stop. His art is not an art of punctuation (although often, while speaking of one of his sculptures, he draws on paper, at the rate of ten drawings a minute, a storyboard of its various aspects). It is an art of montage, an art that is not satisfied to interrupt continuity temporarily, but produces continuity by a double negation, by destroying the pictorial recovery of continuity through discontinuity, dissociation, and the loss of identity within the fragment.

Now what? This whole additional excursion into the eighteenth century just to be able to say that Serra and the picturesque are completely different? They're not completely different, although the use made by Serra of ideas developed two centuries ago could hardly be identical with what was done with them then, in that cult of rationality represented by the Enlightenment. One might therefore wonder why I have insisted on circumscribing my interpretation of his work in a vocabulary and a debate two centuries old. There are two fundamental reasons.

The first has to do with Serra's manifest hostility to architects. If this hostility is, in my opinion, wholly justified, if Serra can rightly say of *Terminal* that this sculpture reduces almost all the architecture surrounding it to the mediocrity of its "cardboard-model inventiveness" (p. 129), it is because he once again brings to bear on his work notions that appeared in the architectural debates of the eighteenth century, and which architects have since repressed. The history of this repression, which I have tried to trace here, has seemed to me indispensable if we are to understand the singular nature of Serra's work. It was never a question to my mind of unearthing sources for him, of seeking connections and

50. Quoted by Dora Wiebenson, *The Picturesque Garden in France*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978, note 86, p. 74.



Richard Serra. Terminal. 1977.

influences. Quite the opposite, it was a matter of showing that the strength of his innovation was the raw one of the return of the repressed. Let us take another look at this aspect of architecture. After Leroy, the only theoretician who conceives architecture anew in terms of the effect it will produce on the moving spectator is Boullée. He does so in exactly the same way as Leroy, but he adds a word to his predecessor's vocabulary, a word to which I will come back: *sublime*. (I might add that a whole parallel could be traced between the idea formulated by Boullée of a *buried* architecture and Serra's sculptures that are sunk in the ground.) Following Boullée, but a century later, the historian Auguste Choisy was to be the first to reexamine this question of the peripatetic view. He did so in connection with a discovery very much his own (truly unheard-of and incomprehensible to architects trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, for it pointed directly at something they had obscured at the very heart of the example they wanted to imitate), that of "Greek picturesque" (namely, the asymmetrical arrangement of Greek temples, depending on the site).⁵¹ Then came Le Corbusier, one of the few architects spared by Serra in his general anathema. Leaving aside the issue of whether the architectural concept of "promenade" invented by Le Corbusier is strongly influenced by Choisy's fantastic discovery—the important thing here is that, for the first time since Boullée, an architect speaks of the play of parallax for his architecture, if necessary borrowing from other cultures, as the cubists did from primitive art.

We know the text in Le Corbusier's *Oeuvres complètes* that accompanies his designs for the Villa Savoye:

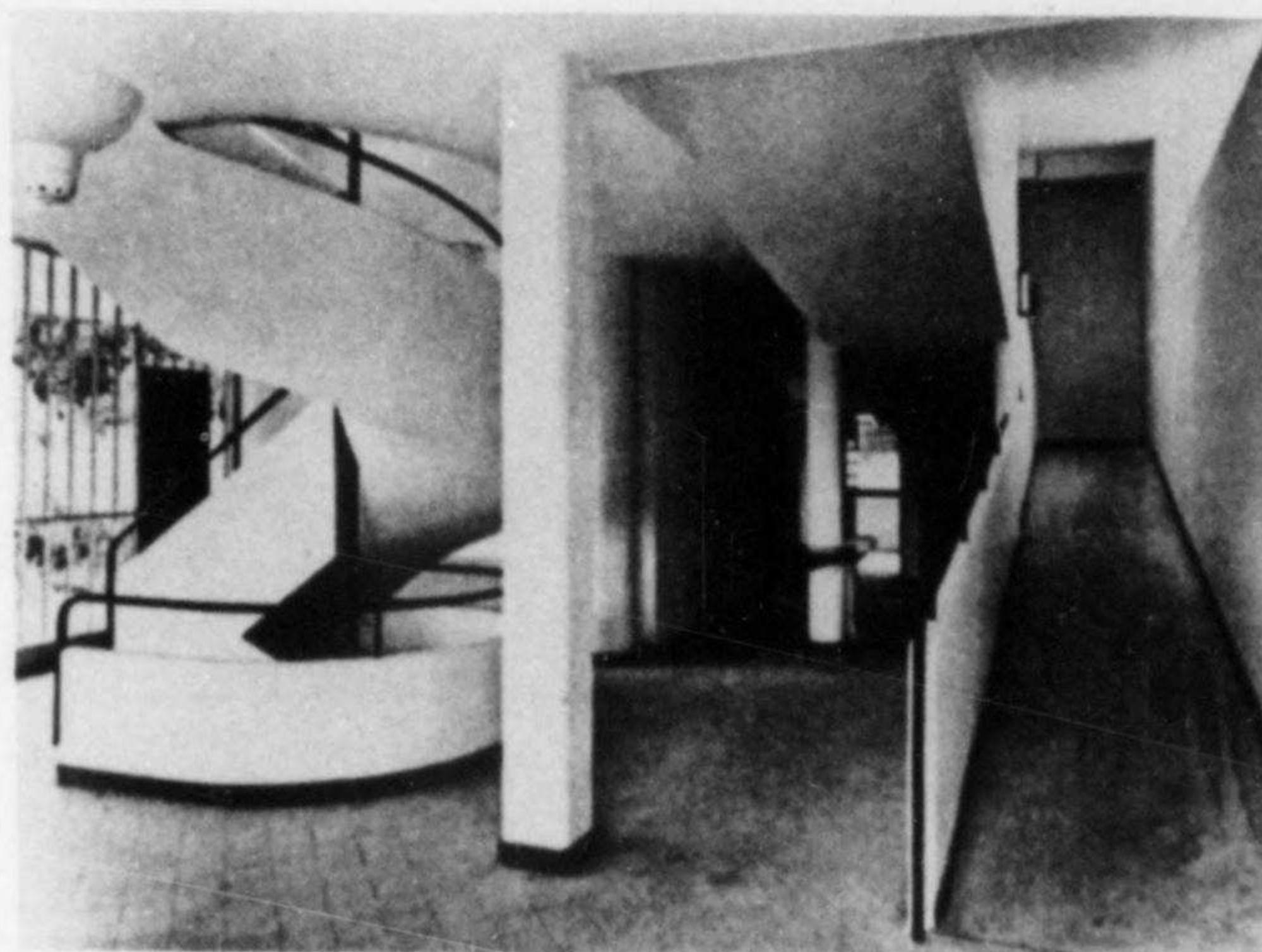
Arab architecture has much to teach us. It is appreciated *while on the move*, with one's feet; it is while walking, moving from one place to another, that one sees how the arrangements of the architecture develop. This is a principle contrary to Baroque architecture. . . . In this house [the Villa Savoye], we are dealing with a true architectural promenade, offering constantly varied, unexpected, sometimes astonishing aspects. It is interesting to obtain so much diversity when one has, for example, allowed from the standpoint of construction an absolutely rigorous pattern of posts and beams.⁵²

Now here two things should be stressed. On the one hand, this "pattern of

51. "The Greeks do not imagine a building independently of the site that frames it and the buildings that surround it. The idea of leveling the vicinity is absolutely foreign to them. They accept, while scarcely regularizing it, the location as nature has created it, and their only concern is to harmonize the architecture with the landscape; Greek temples are as worthy for the choice of their site as for the art with which they are built." There follows a description of the various groups of temples, especially the Acropolis in Athens, according to the effect produced on a moving spectator. "Le pittoresque dans l'art grec," *Histoire de l'Architecture*, vol. I (1899). My thanks to Jacques Lucan for having pointed out this text to me.

52. Le Corbusier, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II, Zurich, Editions d'architecture, 1964 p. 24.

Le Corbusier. Villa Savoye. 1929-31.



posts" is certainly not absolutely rigorous (contrary to what Le Corbusier says a little later, the posts are not "equidistant"). On the other hand, this disturbance of the plan has been made necessary by the first vertical breach constituted by the ramp, then further complicated by the displacement, in the planning stage, of the staircase (which became on this occasion a spiral one)—that is to say, in two different ways, by *thoroughfares*. It has sometimes been asked why Le Corbusier kept this troublesome ramp (he who claimed that the plan generated the architecture) when a simple staircase (especially a spiral one) would have posed fewer problems. Now the very *subject* of the Villa Savoye is the penetration of a vertical section into a horizontal grid (the "Do-mi-no" grid dating from 1914 and tried out in the designs for the Citrohan houses of 1920-22, in which the staircase was always conceived as exterior to the grid). It is this vertical penetration by the passageway into the arrangement of the plan, this disturbance of the plan by the elevation and by the movement of the stroller, that creates the richness and *intricacy* of the Villa Savoye (and in a certain way one could say that the aim of the free plan corresponds in Le Corbusier, despite what he says about it, to a wish to free his architecture from the generating tyranny of the plan). Le Corbusier, as his vocabulary shows, again takes up the idea of the picturesque, and tries to imagine what a picturesque architecture might be. But with him, as with Serra, it is a question of a modern picturesque, and not one of narrative and pictoriality. Hence the necessity, in the Villa Savoye, of a division of labor and a duplication ("one ascends imperceptibly by a ramp, which is a totally different feeling from the one provided by a staircase formed by steps. A staircase separates one floor from another, a ramp connects them"⁵³). It is from this unequal duplication, this conflict between continuity

53. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

and discontinuity, that the experience of shock is born: quite late in the development of the project Le Corbusier pierced the stairwell, which had been conceived at the beginning as a semi-cylindrical blind box, and bored openings in it that are like the displaced projection onto the cylinder of the triangles delineated by the ramp. Why this give-and-take? Because the machine is not inhabited by a hermit: "It is most exhilarating when we can sense our movement in relation to another person on another path, catching and losing sense of that person, playing curve off straight and step off stride. Then we are acutely aware of our own movement by its periodic relation to that of another participant."⁵⁴ The fact that these remarks are by a present-day architect and critic in no way detracts from my general thesis (that architects today have much to learn not only from Le Corbusier but also from Serra), for just as Le Corbusier's kinetic intelligence was something exceptional, so the understanding of that intelligence among architects today remains the thing least shared in the world. Now it is just this, this attention to the effects of a dual movement, that makes Serra's sculpture a lesson in architecture. At the time he was developing his ideas for *Shift*, Serra spent five days walking about the site with Joan Jonas: the "boundaries" of the work were determined by the maximum distance that two people could cover without losing sight of each other. "The horizon of the work," says Serra, "was established by the possibilities of maintaining this mutual viewpoint" (p. 25). Or again: "My open works [those that one can pass through] are not concerned with internal relationships. They have to do with looking from where they are into space, or from where they are to where the other one is placed" (p. 51). Whether this "other one" is another element of the sculpture (as in *Open Field Vertical/Horizontal Elevations*, ten steel cubes scattered in a seemingly huge park) or another spectator comes to the same thing, for here we are dealing with an experience of reciprocity, of mutuality.

It is over this fracture of identity, this division of one into two, that the history of parallax and of the picturesque promenade enters into Le Corbusier's architecture and Serra's sculpture. Hence the necessity I feel to trace back the discontinuous threads of this history, even though it might mean a temporary retreat into the eighteenth century.

The second reason for this backward look in time is less direct but no less essential.

Anyone concerned with the history of sculpture during these last twenty years will recall the fundamental and vehement attack on minimalism published by Michael Fried at the end of the 1960s. In a certain way, all of Serra's oeuvre is an implicit reply to Michael Fried's text. Here it is not a question of going back over the terms of the discussion or even of summarizing "Art and

54. Robert J. Yudell, "Body Movement," in Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore, *Body, Memory, and Architecture*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977, p. 68.

Objecthood."⁵⁵ Let us merely say that, according to Fried, minimalist art sinks into "theater" (understood as the identification of the space of art with that of the spectator, daily life, and the world of objects), while for him the essential goal of modernist art, and of sculpture in particular, has been to affirm its autonomy in relation to this real space. More than just an attack on the confusion between two kinds of space—which would simply have repeated Adolf von Hildebrand's criticism of panoramas and Canova's tombs at the end of the last century⁵⁶—Fried's text denounced in the minimalist work its implication of the *duration* of the spectator's experience. To Tony Smith's enthusiastic account of a drive on an unfinished turnpike (an account of a journey conceived as a model of the minimalist experience), Fried opposed the atemporality and instantly intelligible perception of the sculptors he was defending ("at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest"⁵⁷). Fried opted for a *pictorial* conception of sculpture (following in this an idea of Greenberg's: sculpture is doomed to exist in the world of objects, and should therefore be as two-dimensional as possible in order to escape this condition of existence as much as it can⁵⁸). "Pictoriality," on the contrary, seemed to Smith too narrow a framework to be able to produce experiences similar to the one he had had on the turnpike. The position termed modernist (both Greenberg's and Fried's, despite their differences) relies openly on Kant: an absolute distinction between the world of art and that of artifacts, immediacy of judgment about the beautiful, indifference to the object's *material* existence (Greenberg never speaks of texture, for example, or does so only in general terms). Furthermore, for Kant, the beautiful "is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having [definite] boundaries,"⁵⁹ and Fried tells us that it is the absence of *a priori* determination of their limits that radically distinguishes minimalist sculptures from modernist works of art. Indeed, in speaking of *Spin Out*, Serra states: "there isn't any definition of boundary" (p. 37). Finally, for Kant (as for Fried), "in the case of the beautiful taste presupposes and maintains the mind in *restful* contemplation."⁶⁰ Kant makes no reference, in his "Analytic of the Beautiful," to the duration of the spectator's experience (even when it is a question of music), nor to the movement of his body (especially when it is a question of architecture).

55. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, New York, Dutton, 1968, pp. 116-147.

56. Adolf von Hildebrand, *Das Problem der Form in der Bildenden Kunst*, 1903. For Hildebrand, Canova's funerary monuments, unlike those of Michelangelo, are to be condemned because in them there is no "boundary established between the monument and the public."

57. Fried, p. 145.

58. Cf. Clement Greenberg, "The New Sculpture," reprinted in *Art and Culture*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1965, pp. 143.

59. Emmanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard, New York, Hafner, 1951, § 23, p. 82.

60. *Ibid.*, § 24, p. 85.

That the modernist aesthetic is Kantian through and through, no one will deny, nor that Fried's or Greenberg's interpretation of the first book of the first section of the first part of the *Critique of Judgment* is well founded. It is simply that this interpretation is singularly partial, in both senses of the word. It is as though modernism had obliterated that whole other side of the Kantian aesthetic, book II of the same portion of this work, entitled "Analytic of the Sublime." For although "the beautiful and the sublime agree in this that both please in themselves" (i.e., without conclusion), "there are also remarkable differences between the two."⁶¹ While the beautiful, for example, concerns the form of the object, and thus its limitation, "the sublime, on the other hand, can be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is represented in it, and yet its totality is also present to thought."⁶² And while in the beautiful totality is immediately apprehended, the feeling of the sublime comes from the contradiction between apprehension (which "can go on *ad infinitum*") and comprehension (which quickly reaches a maximum, beyond which the imagination cannot go⁶³). In other words, the feeling of the sublime lies in the separation between the *idea* of totality and the perceived impossibility of understanding that totality. The amazement of someone entering Saint Peter's in Rome for the first time is for Kant a sublime experience par excellence (it was *not sublime enough*, I might add, for a Leroy or a Boullée, for whom the church seemed much smaller than it actually was, due to the lack of attention paid to the play of parallax). Here is what Kant says about this virgin spectator penetrating to the heart of the papacy: "For there is here a feeling of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the idea of a whole, wherein the imagination reaches its maximum, and, in striving to surpass it, sinks into itself, by which, however, a kind of emotional satisfaction is produced."⁶⁴ (The pleasure I felt while walking in *Spin Out* did not occur in spite of my inability to grasp its geometric form, but because of that inability.) In a word, Kant, in his "Analytic of the Sublime," is forced to imagine a mechanism of perception quite different from the one he assumes in his theory of judgment about the beautiful. In particular, he is obliged to introduce the temporality of the aesthetic experience. Of course, for him, it is still a question, as Smithson remarks about all idealist theories of art, of a movement of the mind, but this movement is induced by the characteristics of the object ("the feeling of the sublime brings with it as its characteristic feature a *movement* of the mind bound up with the judging of the object"⁶⁵). Why? Because the feeling of the sublime can only come from the grandeur of the object and the impossibility of controlling or understanding this grandeur by

61. *Ibid.*, § 23, p. 82.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*, § 26, p. 90.

64. *Ibid.*, § 26, p. 91.

65. *Ibid.*, § 24, p. 85.

thought. From the impossibility, as Serra would say, of having a "Gestalt" view of it.

For when apprehension has gone so far that the partial representations of sensuous intuition at first apprehended begin to vanish in the imagination, while this ever proceeds to the apprehension of others, then it loses as much on one side as it gains on the other; and in comprehension there is a maximum beyond which it cannot go.⁶⁶

So far as I know, this is the only passage in the whole *Critique of Judgment* where Kant speaks in temporal terms ("begin," "goes forward," "next") of the mechanism of the aesthetic imagination, and one could call it a paraphrase of Serra's comments about his *Rotary Arc*. That it is a question of the "Analytic of the Sublime" and not that of the beautiful simply shows that the Kantian criteria applied by Greenberg and Fried in their condemnation of minimalism were inappropriate, since one cannot judge the sublime by the criteria of the beautiful.⁶⁷

I can imagine Serra's negative reaction to Fried's indictment interspersed with Kant (since his work, even more than minimalism, falls under the hammer of this neo-Kantian diatribe). But it seemed to me that a brief return to Kant, by way of the sublime, was called for here. Not only because if the rupture of modernity actually took place in the eighteenth century, it is necessary for us today to go back over that past (that is, incidentally, what Michael Fried has done, endeavoring to describe, in order to shore up his position, what was produced at the time of this rupture, i.e., "in the age of Diderot"⁶⁸). But also because the picturesque, as Smithson observed, flows from the sublime:

Price extended Edmund Burke's *Inquiry into the Origin of our ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) to a point that tried to free landscaping from the "picture" gardens of Italy into a more physical sense of the temporal landscape. . . . Burke's notion of "beautiful" and "sublime" functions as a *thesis* of smoothness, gentle curves, and delicacy of nature, and as an *antithesis* of terror, solitude, and vastness of nature, both of which are rooted in the real world, rather than in a Hegelian

66. *Ibid.*, § 26, p. 90.

67. I find by chance an unexpected ally in the issue of *Perspecta* containing the article by Serra that I have quoted several times, in the person of Karsten Harries, who teaches philosophy at Yale University. In an article entitled "Building and the Terror of Time," Harries refers to Michael Fried's text and to an essay by the sculptor Robert Morris ("The Present Tense of Space," *Art in America*, January/February 1978). Although the differences between the art of the two sculptors are striking, I could have mentioned Morris's text often, for it brilliantly articulates certain ideas expressed aphoristically by Serra, and speaks in particular of Saint Peter's in Rome and of ruins. Harries concludes the passage in his text devoted to Morris with these words: "Just as Fried can refer to Kant to support his understanding of modernism, in the same way Morris can refer to the *Critique of Judgment*, but it is another section of the book that is appropriate, the 'Analytic of the Sublime'" (p. 68).

68. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting & Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980.

ideal [it is this empirical basis of Burke's text that Kant criticized]. Price and Gilpin provide a *synthesis* with their formulation of the "picturesque," which is on close examination related to chance and change in the material order of nature.⁶⁹

For Burke, the beautiful and the sublime were irreconcilable; they remained so for Price and Gilpin. But as Price wrote: "the picturesque appeared halfway between the beautiful and the sublime; and this may be why it allies itself more often and more happily with both than they do with each other."⁷⁰ There is thus a beautiful picturesque and a sublime picturesque: it is to this second category, if you like, that Serra's art belongs.

The word *picturesque*, says Smithson, is itself like a sublime tree struck by lightning in a picturesque English garden of the eighteenth century: "This word in its own way has been struck by lightning over the centuries. Words, like trees, can be suddenly deformed or wrecked, but such deformation or wreckage cannot be dismissed by timid academics."⁷¹ It has taken all the support of Serra's work for a timid academic like myself to attempt to repair the damage.

69. Smithson, pp. 118-119. On Gilpin, in quite another context, see also Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition," *October*, 18 (Autumn 1981), pp. 45-66.

70. Quoted by Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, "En blanc et noir," *Macula*, 1 (1976), p. 13.

71. Smithson, p. 118.

The Index of the Absent Wound
(Monograph on a Stain)*

GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN

translated by THOMAS REPENSEK

Almost Nothing to See

It is a large piece of linen serge, covered with stains. Lined with red silk (one side is therefore covered over), it has been carefully rolled up and placed in a silver reliquary. The reliquary itself is locked behind a metal grating within a monumental altar that stands beneath Guarini's soaring black marble dome in Turin. None of the sheet (*lenzuolo*) itself, therefore, is visible. One kneels before a photographic negative, as it were, enshrined in the altar and illuminated from within.

Sometimes — though very rarely — it is carried in a procession, an ostentation of the object, in person, if we can call it that. But even then nothing can be seen. All the faithful express the same dissatisfaction: “. . . I was disappointed: *non si vede niente* (you can't see anything) everyone was saying. We tried. . . .”¹ But the dissatisfaction and the attempt to see constitute *something*. In fact, *almost* nothing was visible. “We tried to see something else,” the spectator goes on to say, “and little by little we could see.”² Almost nothing was visible, that is to say: already something other than *nothing* was visible in that *almost*. One actually saw, then, something else, simply in the looking forward to it or the desiring of it.

But the modalities of the desire to see are extremely refined. The little-by-little of this “discovery” itself takes on the form of a dizzying spiral that is both precise, as dialectic, and overwhelming, as unending baptism of sight. Following it to its source raises the very question of the advent of the visible. And that involves an entire constellation of ideas, conventions, and phantasms, which I will deal with here only partially, from the point of view of a single stain.

* This text is a summary of a paper presented at Urbino in July 1983 at the colloquium “Rhetoric of the Body,” in response to the well-developed arguments of Louis Marin on Nicole and the Veronica question.

1. Pierre Vignon, reply to M. Donnadieu, in *L'Université catholique*, XL, no. 7 (1902), p. 368.
2. *Ibid.*



Ostentation (Enrie, 1931).

Let us recall that the historic impetus that rendered the shroud of Turin visible — or more precisely, figurative — is found in the history of photography.³ When Secondo Pia immersed in the chemical bath his last attempt to produce a clear photograph of the holy shroud — his earlier attempts had all been underexposed — this is what happened: there in the dark room, the moment the negative image took form (the inaugural glimpse), a face looked out at Pia from the bottom of the tray. A face he had never before seen on the shroud. A face that was, he said, *unexpected*. And seeing it he almost fainted. The event took place during the night of the 28th to the 29th of May, 1894.⁴

It was after this “amazing” occurrence (just as the negative coalesced) that the pattern of stains on the shroud of Turin took on a recognizable form. The photographic negative revealed what one had never hoped to see on the shroud itself. As the photographic “evidence” objectified an aspect of the shroud, it became proof of a miracle. Not only did it sanction an unprecedented sort of expository value for this relic heretofore hidden from view, it reestablished the *aura* of the shroud, investing the object itself with a counterpart to its semiotic status. The holy shroud became the *negative imprint* of the body of Christ, its *luminous* index miraculously produced and miraculously inverted in the very act of resurrection, henceforth to be conceived of in photographic terms.⁵

The stain we are concerned with here remains, with others, outside the confines of this splendid hermeneutical elaboration, since it cannot be explained by the theory of a negative flash of light, *achiropoïete*, that would reconstitute the actual appearance of the Christly body. It doesn't seem to lend itself to being raised up (in the sense of the dialectical *Aufhebung*) into something figurative; it seems to defy comprehension as a recognizable image. It says nothing about the economy of its support (which would at least establish the hypothesis of a luminous-negative index). It seems to exist only in terms of its tonal variations, only as an effect of its support. Yet the tonal variations of the fabric have no precise limits, sequence, or articulation. It seems to exist, therefore, only as the uncertain effect of something as undifferentiated background. Between the *spatium* (the background in question) and the pure surface, this stain reveals itself only in the precarious opening of the becoming visible; it is deployed only as a closing of signification, a closing to signification. It says nothing. It doesn't seem made to be understood (whereas a figure, a recognized image, a facial ap-

3. I use the term *impetus* rather than *origin* because it concerns the universalizing moment of this *making visible*. Before the camera was passionately focused on the shroud of Turin and the train of its hermeneutic or polemical effects (the thousands of articles written on the topic since 1898), few authors devoted themselves to the study of a relic that had been exceedingly discreet and stingy in its allocation of miracles. They include: Pingone (1581), Paleotto (1598), Chifflet (1624), Capré (1662).

4. Cf. especially A. Loth, *Le portrait de N.S. Jésus-Christ d'après le Saint Suaire de Turin*, Oudin, Paris, n.d. [1900], pp. 25-27.

5. The reader is referred to my study, “Le négatif et al relève de figurabilité — Note sur un drap photographié,” forthcoming.

pearance always point to or at least carry the promise of meaning). It seems to arise from pure contingency. It tells nothing in itself about its origin. Would segmenting or scanning it give it meaning? Yet it appears to be outside the bounds of scansion or any sort of narrativity. It is only a chain of nonmimetic, chance occurrences, neither imperceptible nor yet perceptible as figures.

The stain (Vignon, 1938).



The Indexical Presupposition, Retracement

What we need is a concept of figurative *Aufhebung*. We would have to consider the dichotomy of its field and its means, and how they deploy a dialectical mimesis as initiation of absolute knowledge; how it attempts to transform sensible space⁶ and to begin a movement (Hegel would have said automovement) in the direction of certitude, figural certitude. An absolute seeing that would transcend the scansion of seeing and of knowing; an absolutely reflexive representation. Confronted with its formless stains, interpreters of the shroud imagined such a *transformation*, which photography would actually accomplish. A phantasm associating Christ's passion with the medium of photography would *hallucinate* such a transformation (with all the beauty, rigor, and insane precision the term implies).

We have to look at this stain again, but this time with the "foresight" of such figural certainty in mind, or its "phantasm," its *phantasia* in the Hegelian sense; for Hegel considered *Phantasie* an *Aufhebung*, and spoke of the movement of truth as a delirium of absolute translucidity.⁷

But first it must be stated that in that very place where figuration abolishes itself—as in this stain—it also generates itself. This, in a way, amounts to setting forth a transcendental phenomenology of the visible, which would describe with regard to this stain, appearance (*phainesthai*, which, however, has the same root as *phantasia* in the element signifying light) as the very process of *disfiguration*; it would describe how this stain came *not* to possess a figurative aspect. That requires in any case inventing a structure of substitutions, returns, and representations: a structure of *retracement*. Retrace, in other words, tell, *retell* a story, but also trace *a line* over it, a line that, let's say, will make the original trace "represent a subject for other traces," those traditional narratives known as the gospels.

The prodigality (sophism) of hermeneutics consists therefore in laying this trace over a story which it does not in any way represent. If this constitutes an aporia, then it must be noted that a hermeneutic enterprise is able to override any semiotic aporia that threatens to impede the automovement of its figural certainty. This movement has its premise in the hypothesis declared earlier (it is a ravishing hypothesis in any case), that there, just where figuration effaces itself, it generates itself as well. But the unlooked-for corollary, the supplement, would be the following: the effacement of all figuration in this trace is itself the guarantee of a link, of *authenticity*; if there is no figuration it is because *contact*

6. Hegel considers every signifying process an *Aufhebung* of sense-space intuition. Cf. Jacques Derrida, "The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's Semiology," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982.

7. Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, London, Oxford University Press, 1977; and J.-L. Nancy, *La remarque speculative*, Paris, Galilée, 1973, pp. 137-140.

has taken place. The noniconic, nonmimetic nature of this stain guarantees its *indexical value*. I might add that the word *authenticity* is common to the vocabulary used by Peirce to describe the index⁸ and to the cultural discourse of theologians concerning relics (the stain itself is like a micro-session — and no less important for that — in the great authenticating process focused on the shroud of Turin, a process that never ends).

The absence of figuration therefore serves as proof of existence. Contact having occurred, figuration would appear false. And the signifying opaqueness itself reinforces the *it was* of an object (in the Peircian sense, we know that an index does not cease to be an index when the interpretant fails to account for it, whereas the existence of its referential object — the illness related to a symptom, for example — is semiotically essential⁹). Every figure has its origin where it is effaced, if that place of origin is a place of contact.

But that also means that an *act* is thereby — though no less originally — set in motion. Peirce defines the symptom as a paradigm of the index, because the symptom locates on a semiotic plane an illness in the process of acting¹⁰ — a *drama*, that is, an action fraught with consequences; in Greek there is a word for murder and a word for ritual. Figuration is effaced just where drama provides its index; this means, in its fullest sense, that the more fully drama is freighted with consequence, the greater, and more beautiful, will be the splotch, the disfiguration, the stain.

For in fact we are dealing here with crime, blood, and ritual. Figural certitude takes the decisive step of *seeing* substance in this brownish stain. Henceforth it will see a bloodstain. Thus is established the existence of a sheet of linen as a shroud.

The third stage of the argument: If all physical contact calls to mind the act that establishes it (in an indexical relationship), every act calls forth as well, and imperatively, the proper name of the *actor*: he who left some of his blood on this linen sheet (Peirce also considers the proper name to be a paradigm of the index, because it is associated with an absolutely specific subject; he says, however, that the proper name is also a "legisign," because it is a sign that legalizes its relationship to the subject; it is there precisely as an imperative; elsewhere Peirce writes that "if an index could be translated into sentence form, that sentence would be in the imperative or exclamatory mood, as in *Look over there!* or *Watch out!*").¹¹ Now since we are dealing with him in whose Name the shroud is placed in the reliquary altar, and with the drama of his Passion, such as it is found written for all eternity in the books of the gospels, the imperative takes

8. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers*, vols. I-VI, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss; vols. VII-VIII, ed. Arthur Burks, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1931-1935; 1958.

9. *Ibid.*, 2:304.

10. *Ibid.*, 8:119.

11. *Ibid.*, 3:361.

on another meaning, that of dogma. As for the index, it acquires an added dimension, as a prescription to a treasure-trove of symbols. If there is any paralogism it is to be found here: the index reduced to the symbolic imperative of a story in which the possibility of a theology of the resurrection of the body must — semiologically speaking — play a part. The disappointing tenor of this line of thought is felt at once, for it consists of “affirming” the indexicality of a visible sign for the sole purpose of making it shine forth as a beacon of symbolic law.

Elaboration of Detail

It is necessary, *in spite of everything*, to subject this contingent stain to law (concatenation), a passage to discreet order — a division. A *discernment*, a word whose root, *cernere*, contains the three signifying vectors “sifting,” “seeing,” and “deciding,” which is exactly what is involved here.

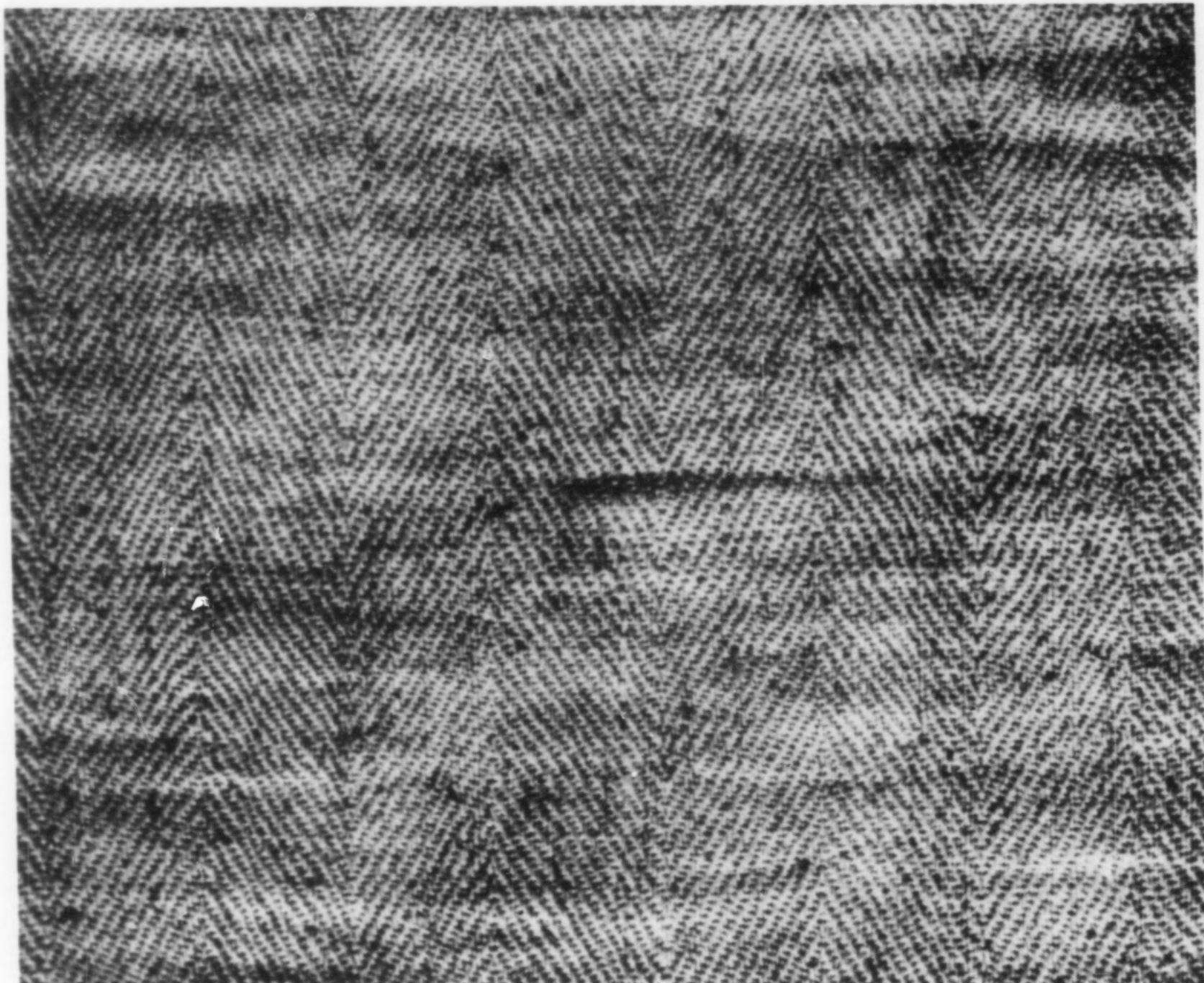
Decidedly, then, let us look at this stain once again; let us draw close to it again, to discern, to define an order of detail and articulation. Yet this stain is, in its physical conditions as in its perceptual effects, inseparable from the texture of its support. Looking closely at a stain on the shroud of Turin results unfortunately in a total loss of perspective. The weave “eats up” all effect of outline, and even tonal distinction. An intimate knowledge of this stained fabric is therefore an obstacle to discernment; because it gives priority to the materiality of the fabric, it compromises the hermeneutical process.

This is undoubtedly, in one sense, an aspect of the epistemic nature of detail. Detail, Bachelard recalled, is anti- and ante-categorical. In order to describe a detail, “you have to judge material disturbances beneath the surface. And then, conclusions fluctuate. The first conclusion [from a distance] was correct; it was qualitative, it developed in the discontinuity of numerous predicates. . . . [Detail] is richness, but also uncertainty. Along with its subtle nuances occur profoundly irrational disturbances. . . . At the level of detail, Thought and Reality appear to be set adrift from one another so that as Reality is distanced from the scale at which our thinking normally takes place, it loses its solidity in a certain way, its constancy, its substance. Finally, Reality and Thought are engulfed in the same nothingness.”¹² It should be noted in passing that interpretation (*Deutung*), in the Freudian sense, is established in the contemplation of this very uncertainty of detail (uncertainty thought of henceforth in terms of an attempt at overspecification); this doesn’t in the slightest set it in opposition to a hermeneutic enterprise that functions only “en masse.”¹³

But this “voracious burst” of detail seen at too close a range has a place in

12. Gaston Bachelard, *Essai sur la connaissance approchée*, Paris, Vrin, 1927, pp. 253, 257.

13. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey, London, Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, vols. IV & V; Hubert Damisch, “Le gardien de l’interprétation,” in *Tel Quel*, no. 44 (1971), p. 78; Naomi Schor, “Le détail chez Freud,” in *Littérature*, no. 37 (1980), pp. 3-14.



The fabric (Vignon, 1938).

the phenomenology of visible discernment. From among many possible sources, we could cite Ernst Bloch's *Experimentum mundi*, which develops the theme of the closely considered surface as a "contamination" of the space and a blinding hold on the eye. *Proximity* is with all justification thought of as an *obstacle*, an obscurantist view, an alienating immediacy. I would like to call it the effect of *surface* (to distinguish it from *ground*, which can be apprehended in its parts; to suggest also its anguished, even catastrophic, terror-stricken nature, as a space become wall, wall become sky, sky become hole, intimate dizziness). Now, since obstacles are there to be surmounted, we ought to sense the inevitable appeal of *Aufhebung*. Bloch calls it mediation, elevation, negation, ostentation, rotation by seeing. And this is how, he says, a figure will "appear" or "reappear." He calls this process finally an *elaboration*.¹⁴ And that alone tells us that the problem

14. I am summarizing the general theme of his argument. Cf. Ernst Bloch, *Experimentum mundi. Frage, Kategorien d. Herausbringens, Praxis*, Suhrkamp, 1975.

of detail does not have its source only in the problematic of pure perception. The problem here is not one of a *Gestalttheorie*, in as much as, according to Merleau-Ponty's critique, *Gestalttheorie* uses a concept of "form" as pure cause or something "real," given.¹⁵ It is a question rather of considering the appearance of figuration or recognizable form as a process of *elaborated distancing*. Distancing creates visibility, in as much as it involves elaboration.

I think it is necessary to understand this word in its Freudian sense as elaboration or working through (*Verarbeitung, Bearbeitung*); an associative process that presupposes its object, rendering it suitable to support a fantasy. Case in point: a fantasy of the Christly body, filigreed in discernment, on the sheet, a (double) "silhouette." We may get some understanding of this presupposition and of this elaborated distancing from Paul Vignon, one of the principal interpreters of the holy shroud, in a passage where he attests to the appearance of a recognizable image on the stained fabric: "Close up, *in place of the images*, he [he is referring to himself] hardly saw anything except formless spots, similar to mildew or rust stains, which several persons also reported seeing. From a distance however. . . , all these stains blended together and harmoniously arranged themselves so as to constitute the two images *which since then have become well known. . . .*"¹⁶

Now to return to the close-up view, this time with figural certainty provisioned (previsioned) well in advance. Vignon provides this detailed view of the fabric: "One area beneath the left hand . . . at first seemed void of any impression. . . . By looking from rather far away, you could make out shadowy impressions caused by the first phalanxes of the index finger and the middle finger of the right hand, which extend on the diagonal from the upper right to the lower left."¹⁷

The Dramaturgical Deduction: The Wound

"Getting near involves playing at getting farther away. The game of far and near is the game of distance," writes Maurice Blanchot.¹⁸ Elaboration makes the detour possible. The detour involves distancing. It calls forth its own *return*; it invokes the story of something rising up from "the depths of time," something that fills up a period of waiting. Something unique and far away, however near it may be.¹⁹ In this game of near and far, therefore, there is an effect of *aura*, in-

15. Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher, Boston, Beacon Press, 1963, p. 144.

16. Vignon, reply to Donnadieu, p. 370. I have italicized the words that seem to designate the presupposition of knowledge in the illusion of its afterthought.

17. Vignon, *Le Saint Suaire de Turin devant la science, l'archéologie, l'histoire, l'iconographie, la logique*, Paris, Masson, 1938, p. 33.

18. Maurice Blanchot, *Le pas au-delà*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973, p. 99.

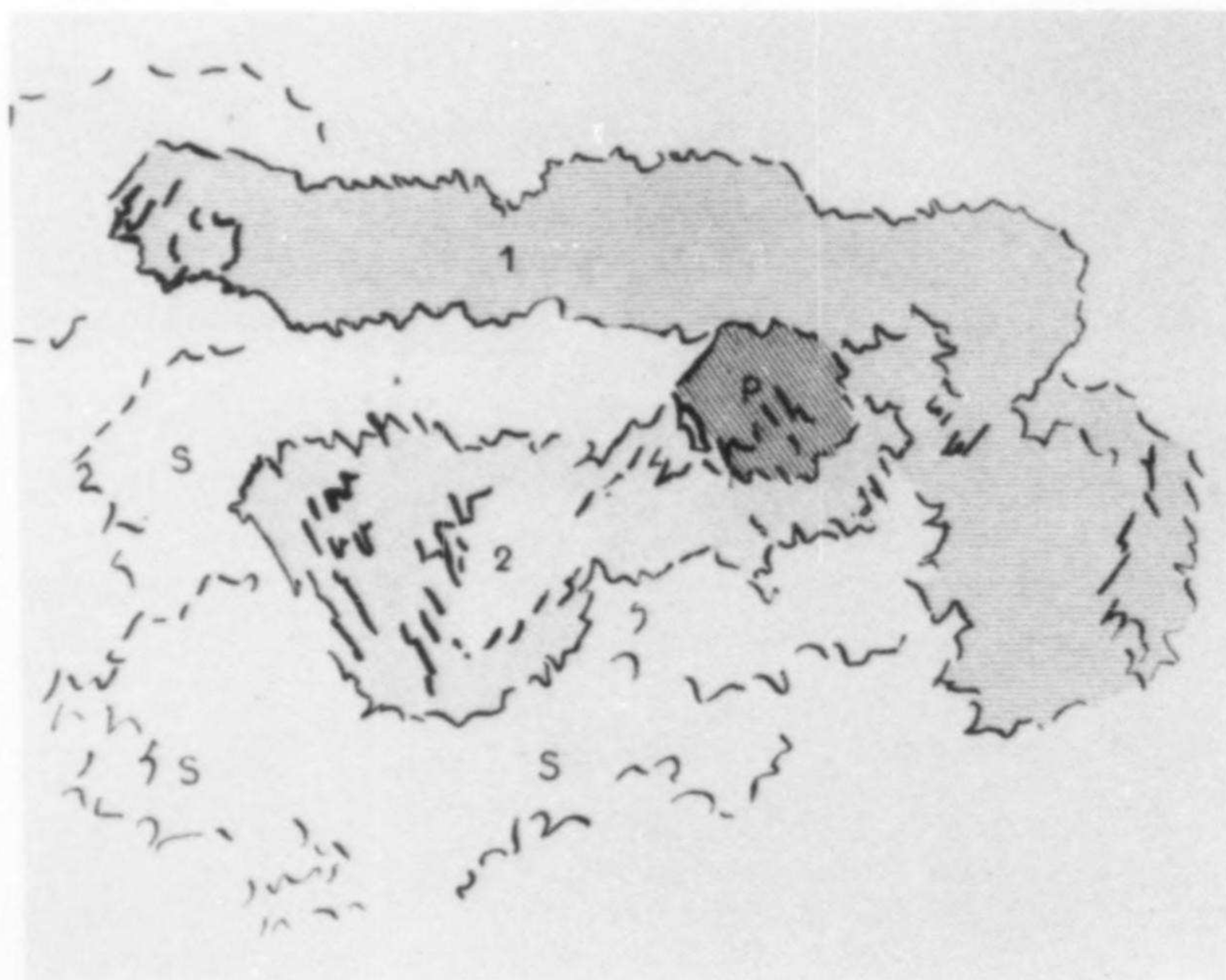
19. Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Some motifs in Baudelaire," in *Charles Baudelaire, A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn, London, New Left Books, pp. 107-154.

volved in the surface of the photograph itself (the shroud of Turin reproduced on film realizes the delicious paradox of glorifying its cultural value). There is finally, in this game of near and far, the ubiquitous presence of the Christly body, which is in the shroud, there without being there, doubly absent, as dead body and body brought back to life, and present in the terrible signs of its Passion. So it is that the power of narrative is grafted eternally to seeing.

This is possible precisely because the elaborated distancing of view locates the shroud on a *screen*. It aims to orthogonalize the indexical vector, to make it projective. If the bloodstain is both the index of a contact and the vector of a projection, then anything is possible.

And the first thing possible for this trace is its tracing, in the sense of *trace drawing*. For it becomes possible actually to draw the unfigurable, to plot it, in as much as it appears to be projectable. By reducing *background* to *surface* we are led to believe that we are actually seeing everything in its smallest detail. The detour of a "transfer drawing" provides the context therefore for some very precise captions: "P: orifice, half filled with flesh from wound made when nail removed. 1: path where blood first flowed from hand and quickly dried. 2: last blood, diluted by serum, along same line. S: serum from wound after blood had dried."²⁰

20. Vignon, *Le Saint Suaire*, p. 3.



Trace drawing (Vignon, 1938).

From this sort of "photographic" detail, the tracing can easily be seen as a "photograph" of a *scene*. As a dramatic event. The unfigurability of this stain will therefore be the index not only of a contact, not only of a substance (blood), but of a "living" wound which interpreters of the shroud have agreed is that of the left hand of Christ, believed to be placed on the right side, at the level of the groin, at the time of burial.

This absent wound will therefore set the stage, by the simple expedient of the tracing of a stain, for the excruciatingly precise scenario of the insertion and removal of the nail, the opening and partial closing of the flesh. A paradigm perhaps of any originating event. This will unquestionably have benefited from the incalculable power of having preestablished a sense of *figurability*, understood as a *means of staging*—a translation suggested by Lacan for what is generally called the consideration of representability, which Freud refers to as *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*. This is where the field I referred to as *figurative Aufhebung* has its fantasmatic extension, in thoughts expressed as images or, as Freud says, as pseudothoughts; in substituting for logic pure relationships of formal contiguity; in the play of displacements of plastic intensity, in their ability to focus and fascinate (referred to here as the "center of the hole," marked P—P as in *plaie* [wound], P as in *profondeur* [depth]—on Vignon's diagram; enchanting the view as long as one takes care to imagine *more*, to the bottom of the hole, the very "bottom" of the body of Jesus); finally, in its ability to use "concrete words," according to Freud, as "links" in a chain²¹ (the word *serum*, for example, which re-engages the visibility of the stain in its entirety).

The appeal to *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit* of course presupposes its extension to *Rücksicht auf Verständlichkeit*, a "coming to grips with intelligibility" (what is also known as secondary elaboration), which, Freud writes, draws figurability out from a dream, from the side of fantasy, which redispaces the visual intensities, limits them or uses them—he says—as a means of "rebuilding a façade," of subsuming the intense image, even the scene, into *scenario*.²² Into coherence, narrative logic.

Our *figurative Aufhebung* functions therefore on the one hand as the "regressive attraction" of a memory (here, a visual phantasm of the Passion as related in the gospels) in the light of its reappearance, its restaging (essentially this is how Freud establishes his definition of coming to grips with figurability²³); on the other hand, it is an operation dialectalized by the "dramaturgical deduction" of a secondary elaboration. But it is not "secondary" in the sense of appearing after the fact, for this elaboration is inscribed at the very outset of this entire operation.

And this operation is constructed so as never to stop. Because it is *Aufhebung*

21. Cf. Freud, "The Means of Representation in Dreams," pp. 310-338.

22. *Ibid.*, "Secondary Revision," pp. 488-508.

23. *Ibid.*, "Considerations of Representability," pp. 339-349.



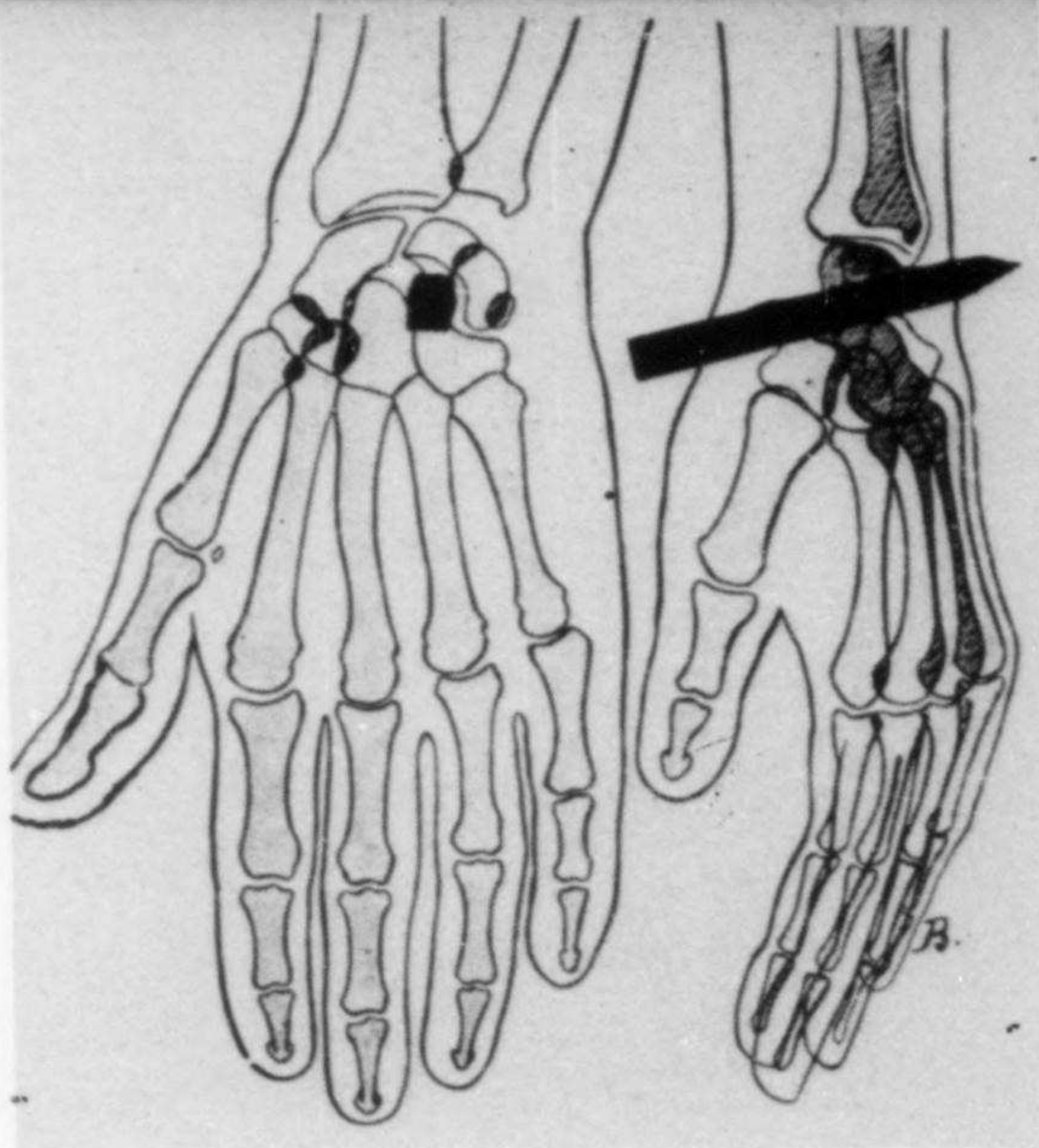
itself. It will henceforth account for all stains and all traces. It will determine a system of traces that will tell the history of the shroud itself, and of its accidents (water stains, for example, or scorch marks from fires that it miraculously escaped); a system of traces of the blood of the Passion, blood that the commentators call “living,”²⁴ and “dead”—deposited on the shroud during the process of burial; and even a system of traces of the partial obliteration of traces, that is, a system that can account for the “white” areas. Thus Paul Vignon saw, beneath “our” stain, “under the left hand (the one with the wound), an organic liquid that stained the sheet with pale, irregularly shaped, circular marks. This liquid partially redissolved the imprint—as it was being formed—of the fingers of the left hand, washing before it the already brownish-colored substance.”²⁵

In fact, this operation is made to stop only at the moment of grace when not only status, substance, and act would be characterized from every trace and even every absence of trace, but even the exact reference to every passage in the gospel concerning the way of the cross, the death, and the resurrection of Christ. It is the *entire* Passion which, imagined, must be *called up* (both in the reference point and in the sense of *Aufhebung*) from the holy shroud. “Geometry” and “experimental science” will be the means employed by this will to an absolute vision.

Abject Proof

A fantasy of referentiality sustains this entire will to see. Actually, to re-see. The hermeneutic of the holy shroud lodges its power of verification in the “reality” (in fact, in the photographic visibility of a stained piece of cloth) of the gospel text. This is why it demands an *experimental verification* of its own semiotic hypotheses.

24. Cf., for example, A. Legrand, *Le Linceul de Turin*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1980, p. 156.
25. Vignon, *Le Saint Suaire*, p. 35.



Opposite: X-rays of crucified hands (Barbet, 1935).
Left: Diagram of hand wound (Barbet, 1935).

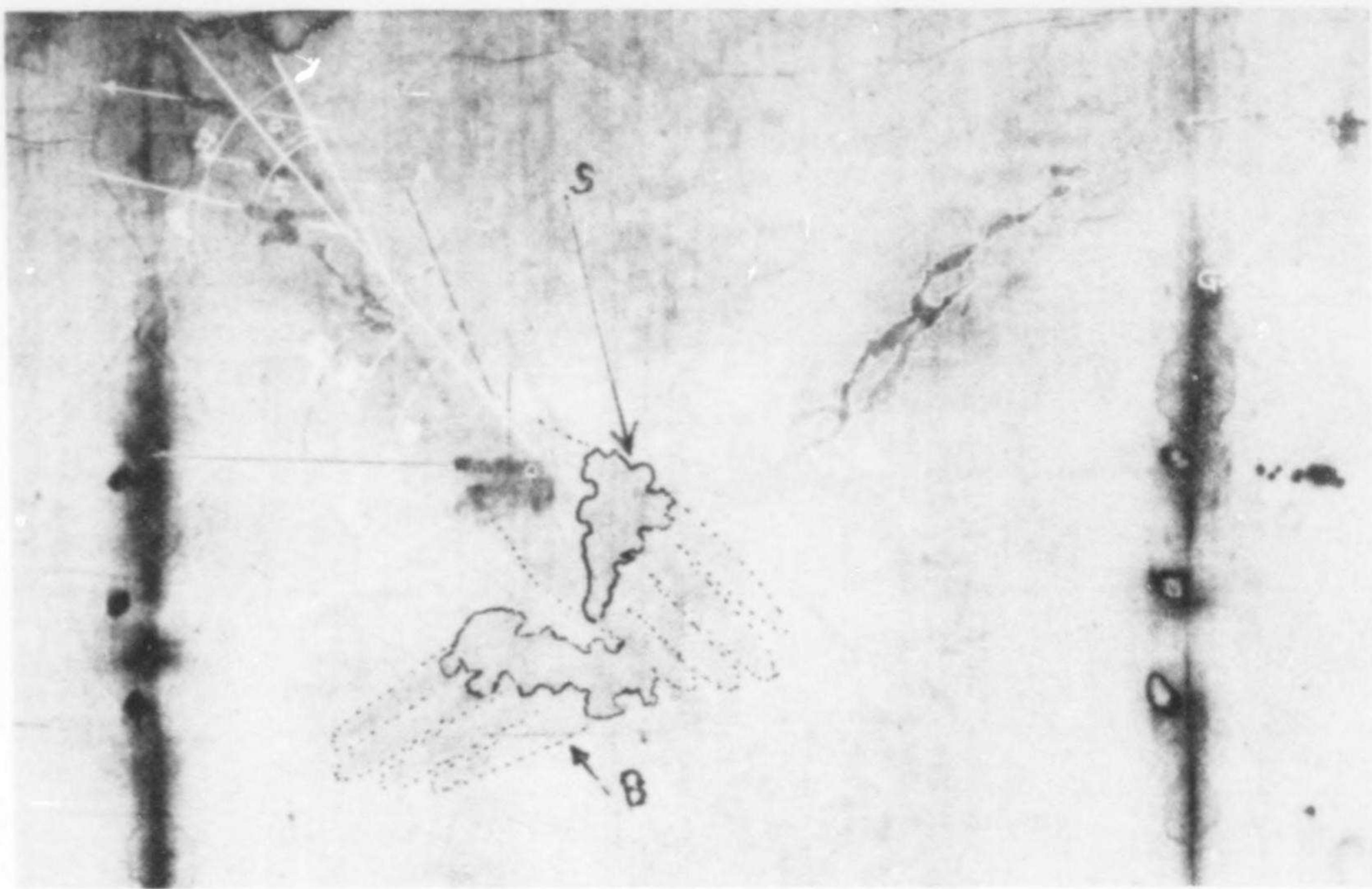
The problem arises then concerning “our” stain and its *localization*, that is, its exact position on the “body-assumed-visible” beyond the fabric (the body of Christ). This stain, we are told, is the blood of the crucified hands. The problem is to find out where exactly the nails made their entry. Pierre Barbet, a surgeon at the Hôpital Saint Joseph in Paris, wrote a work in 1935 entitled *Les cinq plaies du Christ, étude anatomique et expérimentale*,²⁶ in which he frankly stated that his purpose was to “find out where the nails had been driven through; what I did was to *reconstruct* the crucifixion and then X-rayed and dissected the parts.”²⁷ Attempting to prove that Jesus had been crucified from the wrists rather than the palms, he experimented nailing the arms of corpses to a cross by the palms; when he pulled on them, the wound always tore open and the limb would fall to the ground. And then: “After amputating an arm I quickly took an 8-millimeter-square nail, like those used for the crucifixion, which I had shortened to a 5-centimeter length for easier X-raying. With the hand lying flat, face up against the plank, I placed the point of the nail in the middle of the wrist joint, and, holding it straight up, hit it with a large hammer, carefully driving it in straight, and then hard like an executioner.”²⁸ Since the result was conclusive — it “held” — Barbet claimed he “held” proof that it was indeed from the wrist (the Destot opening, in fact) that crucifixion took place. He produced X-rays and diagrams in support of this proof.

We have seen how the figurative elaboration of the stain on the shroud of Turin essentially required a denial of the materiality of its support (in that it necessitated its idealization as screen). But here with Barbet’s act there is a denial of the very surface, since it attempts to explore the fabric as a thickness ca-

26. Pierre Barbet, *Les cinq plaies du Christ. Étude anatomique et expérimentale*, Dillen/Tertiaires Carmélites de l’Action des Grâces, Paris, 1935, 45 pp. (reprinted and expanded in 1950: *La Passion de Jésus-Christ selon le chirurgien*, Apostolat des éditions, Paris, 10 ed., 1982, 262 pp.).

27. *Ibid.*, p. 11. Author’s emphasis.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

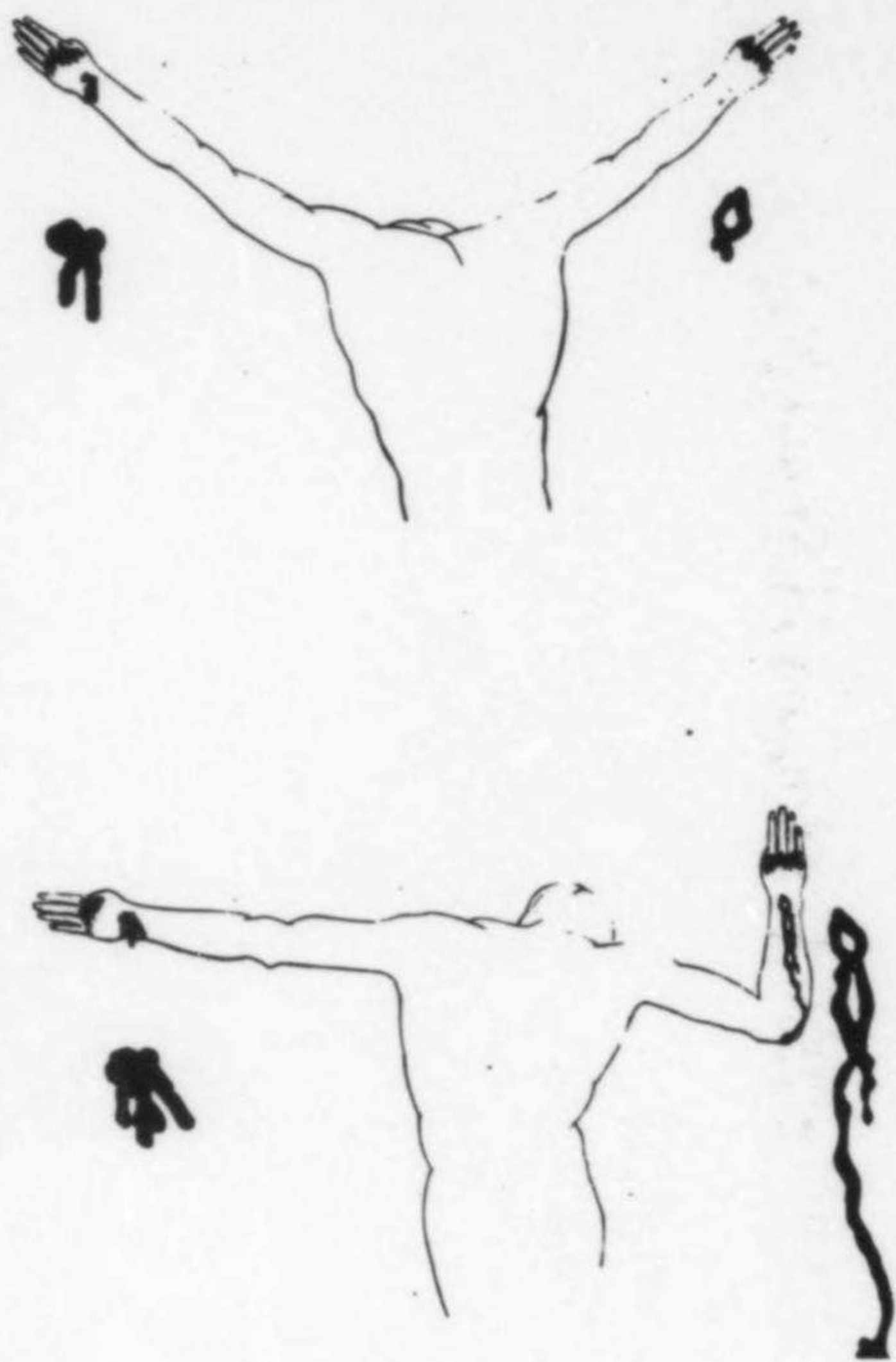


"Geometry" of the stain (Ricci, 1972).

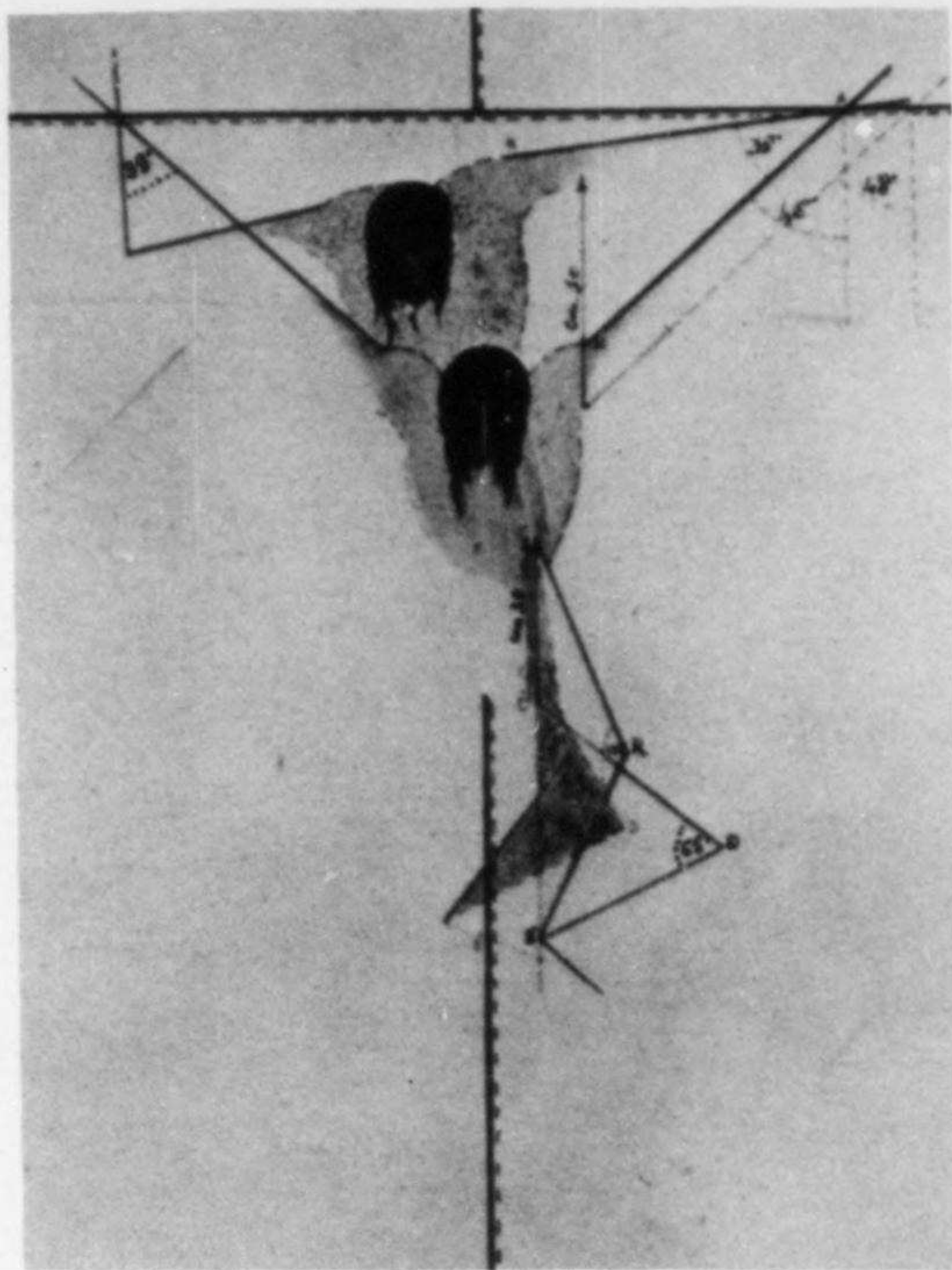
pable of being the object of surgery; it digs into the surface as one would penetrate a body. Photographic elevation of the X-rayed stain of a wound produced by piercing.

The locale of our stain is now clearly identified, in terms of the sort of *ground* that subsumes it: the divine proportions of the Christly body.²⁹ In addition, the formulation of the ground makes it possible to organize the scattered stains into a system; to plot a "geometric figure" that will correlate each stain to each dramatic event of bodily contact, that is, to each "monad" of its suffering — finally to each *moment* in the Passion of Christ. Elevation of a locus of points into quasi-medico-legal narrative terms. In this way we can arrive at the total number of lashes received in the flagellation (although the number varies, depending on the source, from 90 to 121). From this "geometry" we will attempt to make an inference as to the posture of the brutally beaten body, of the body crucified, of the body entombed. We will add a supporting cast of characters having the "right" proportions (deduced from the shroud itself) to *reconstruct* every ritualized moment of the Passion. And in addition to a ground plan, there will be a staging. Proof garnered from the scene for experimental verification. But the staging possesses a logic of its own, and so from a simple stained sheet

29. That the body of the holy shroud is not only the body of a "real" Christ, but also the ideal one of religious iconography, is another bridge cast out over the abyss in studies by Vignon, *Le Saint Suaire*, pp. 115-192; I. Wilson, *Le Suaire de Turin, linceul du Christ?*, trans. Albeck, Albin Michel, Paris, 1978, pp. 128-165; L. Ferri, *La Sindone vista da uno scultore*, La Parola, Rome, 1978, *passim*.



Postural inference (Ricci, 1972).



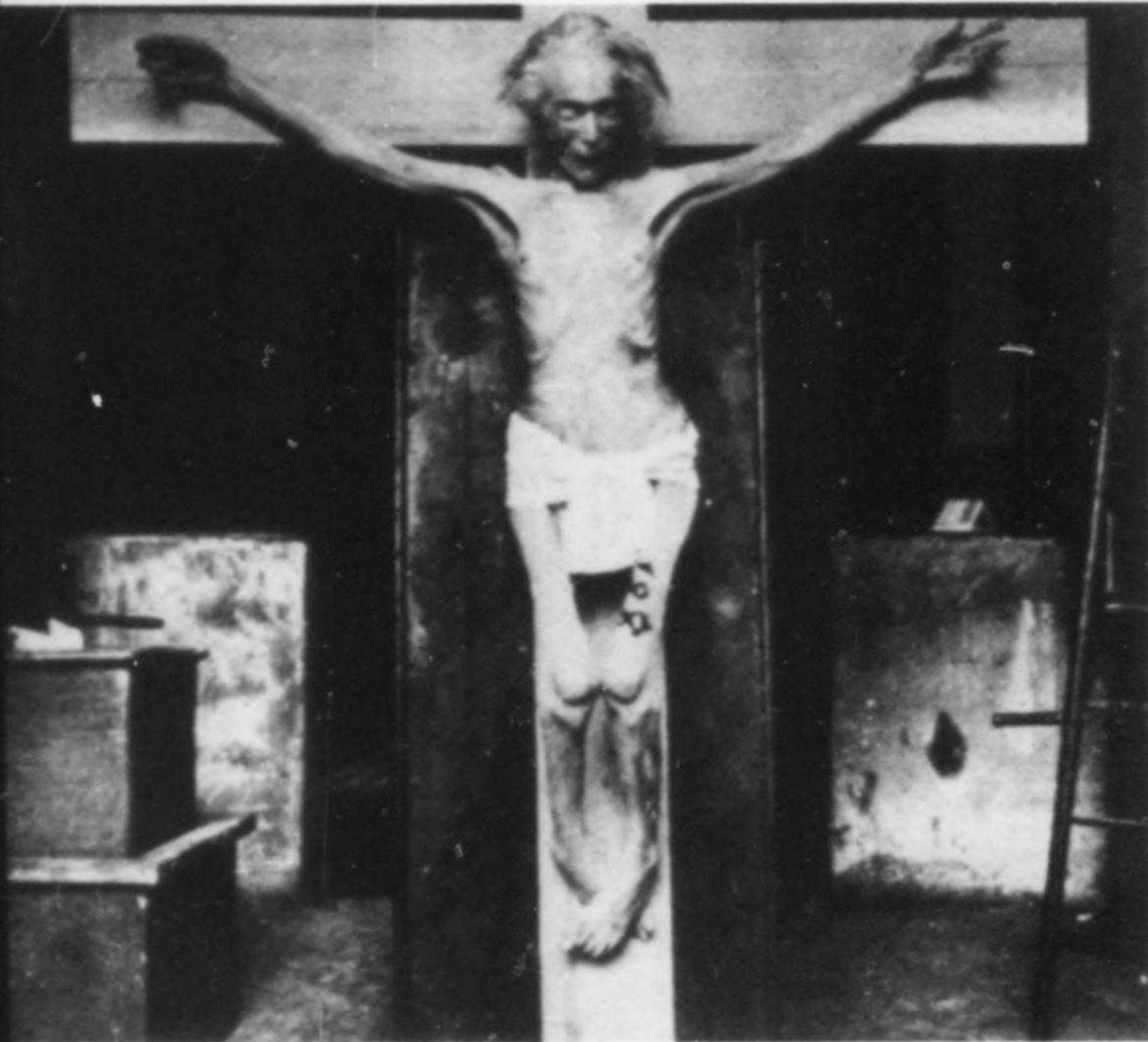
Axonometry of the crucifixion (Ricci, 1972).

the entire story of the gospel will be told, and what the gospels don't tell as well: the saliva of the last utterance, the shackle on the left foot of Christ on the Way of the Cross, its precise appearance, etc.³⁰ It is not for nothing that the shroud of Turin is dubbed the *fifth gospel*.

Our stain will therefore have proven itself susceptible to "geometrization." And this "geometry" will not only facilitate certain postural inferences (position of the nails in the hand, shape and size of the cross), but perhaps will identify something at the source of this entire agonizing fantasy: the very rhythm of Christ's mortal expiration. Interestingly enough, Monsignor Ricci, one of the principle contemporary "sindonologists," uses the term *axonometry* to describe the reconstitution of the spasm. His analysis also provides the principle of formal emergence of the stain, attempting, as it does, to demonstrate why the stain has the appearance that it does, or rather, how it came to have such an appearance, at a given moment of the Passion.

One might perhaps think we have come full circle here. But no. This is movement made never to stop. Pierre Barbet gives a last and abject proof at the conclusion of his work; "one more for good measure," although you sense that in addition to its retrospective function there is also a foundational function: "I apologize for including these last two photographs, which even I think are hideous and blasphemous. . . . I found some human tatter in the Anatomy cloak-

30. Cf. G. Ricci, *Via Crucis secondo la Sindone*, Centro Romano di Sindonologia, Rome, 1972 (French trans., 1981), pp. 17-19, 54.



Experimental restaging of a crucifixion (Barbet, 1935).

room, perfectly fresh and supple";³¹ and he actually crucified it, according to his theory of crucifixion. The photographic visibility of a pure effect of the weave of the fabric was finally transformed into the pure and abject effect of the "real" thing (a "real" person crucified). This is what I was referring to as a fantasy of referentiality.

This abject part of the proof at least signifies that what is called the dramaturgical "deduction" is not a deduction, and not even an induction (in the Aristotelian sense of inductive syllogism). It is really something more like an *abduction*. This is what Aristotle calls a syllogism whose major premise is evident (it is evident that if there are stains on the shroud of Turin they are the index of something), but whose minor premise is only likely (probable); the probability of the conclusion, therefore, is only as great as that of the minor premise.³² For Peirce, an abduction is any sort of reasoning whose conclusion is only probable. In the rhetoric of proof generated from the shroud of Turin, the minor premise would consist of the stage of simulation, of the probability of the reconstruction of the drama of the Passion. The probability of the minor premise is that abduction would therefore be pure *scenic verisimilitude*: a pure resemblance. And

31. Barbet, *Les cinq plaies du Christ*, p. 43.

32. Aristotle, *The Prior Analytics*, trans. John Warrington, New York, Dutton, 1964, II, 25, pp. 71-73.

we see what an *abject* effect it has, this "too highly detailed" — that is, perverse — restaging of an event.

I will cite one last sindonological avatar, Father Côme, whose thesis is defended in *La Sindone e la Scienza*, a small work published by the author, which was presented at a congress in Turin in October 1978.³³ According to his theory there is on the shroud an *ultimate detail*, which is waiting to be seen, *underneath* the stain we have been dealing with: "In order to fold the hands of the victim over the pubic region, which conceals the sexual organs, it would have been necessary to draw the arms back along the body and bend the elbows in spite of the advanced rigidity of rigor mortis and the effect of tetanus due to crucifixion. The persons who first prepared the body for burial were therefore concerned to conceal something they thought should not be seen."³⁴ No one had ever seen what it was, because, Côme writes, no one had dared to look that closely. He tells us what it is: "the most atrocious detail of the Passion of Christ." This something is Christ's sperm. This reflex response is documented in medical accounts of crucifixions and hangings: "the ultimate spasm of erection and ejaculation of the crucified," of which there is, he continues, "on the holy shroud, within view, the means of direct verification, *if one only wishes to avail oneself of it. . . .*"³⁵

Baptism by Sight

The historic value of this theory is unimportant. It is no less exemplary, however, for all its eccentricity.

On the one hand, it effects a passage to the limit of what I referred to as a fantasy of referentiality, the very one contained in the indexical presupposition relating to the stains on the holy shroud, and "elevated" into what could be called "the game of greatest naturalism." Now there is nothing more "naturalistic" than detail as it functions in fantasy (Freud stresses this in regard to screen memories). It is interesting that all this hermeneutical analysis of stains — non-iconic signifiers, pure effects of support or tonality — tends to define, in fact, a new art of *iconic devotion* (in every sense of the term). Most sindonological studies include illustrations of drawings or models that purport to represent the real Christ crucified (in its iconographic sense).³⁶ Verisimilitude regarding the Passion — an act of torture — cannot logically operate within an economy of abjection; these new icons are remarkable rather for the baroque obscenity of the wound and, in particular, its secretion.

Yet it is also true that this excessive naturalism (which has its paradoxical

33. R. P. Côme, *La suprême abjection de la Passion du Christ*, F. Tanazacq, 1955, 2nd rev. ed., 1975, 22 pp.; "Le détail le plus atroce de la Passion du Christ," in *La Sindone e la Scienza*, ed. Paoline/Centro Internazionale di Sindonologia, Turin, 1978, pp. 424-427.

34. Côme, "Le détail le plus atroce," p. 425.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 424.

36. Cf. Barbet, Ricci, Ferri.



Crucifixion: wood sculpture based on data taken from the holy shroud (Ricci, 1972).

source in the historicist and positivist criticism of religion contemporary with the implementation of photography) is entirely contained within a theological order. Côme offers his hypothesis as a veritable *télos* of faith, because it carries compassion to the level of atrocity, that is, he believes, “to the limit of total truth.”³⁷ *Télos* of the eucharistic communion; the drops of divine sperm being the “innumerable sacred fragments of our communion.”³⁸ *Télos*, finally, of the incarnation; Jesus rendering the forfeiture of his death absolute in extremity. This also has its logical confirmation. The “ultimate detail,” writes Côme, “finally allows us to feel we are looking at a complete portrait.”³⁹

37. Côme, *La suprême abjection*, p. 6.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

It is in fact the picture that is complete. The indefinite retracing of the index actually permits its own reversal, its iconic and symbolic elevation. It is like a *baptism of sight* that the hermeneutic of the holy shroud demands in the sense that as in baptism, "by receiving the imprint (*to antitupon*: the index) of the Holy Spirit, everything is accomplished in you as image (*eikonikôs*: as icon), because you are the images (*eikones*) of Christ."⁴⁰

In summary then there was a piece of stained linen. A determination was reached as to its nature: it was blood. Through the fact of contact, the act was described and the actor identified. And his death recreated. Bloodstains made it possible to imagine the meaning and the drama of Christ's Passion.

Lest we forget: the blood itself may only be a product of the imagination. To continue the logic of the index, the experimental fantasy and love of verification, we should perhaps wonder whether it really is blood at all. The infallible method of peroxydation (used in legal medicine to test *even invisible* stains or very old stains) reveals nothing, nothing at all.⁴¹ To this day there is no known blood to be found on the holy shroud.

It goes without saying that in this logic of an indexical assertion, whose aim is to be overwhelmed by the iconic and symbolic dimensions, this does not really constitute an objection to "authenticity" (to divinity). For the index of the glorious body is not an index. It is an *achiropoiëte* icon; the blood-substance will in all cases be transformed by a *luminous* vector, and in all cases the contact, implied by the trace, will be transformed by a vector of *virgin passage* (crossing a surface without touching it: the birth of Christ, Pentecost, and his resurrection, all from the linen shroud). An argument found in Saint Thomas Aquinas could, I believe, be used to characterize this hermeneutical question (and in a certain way, theologically speaking, it rescues it) regarding the substance of our stain. Is it or is it not the blood of Christ? Thomas would say that the blood of Christ is in its entirety *elsewhere*: although blood is a humor, and therefore susceptible to corruption, the blood of Christ is not tainted by original sin; it is wholly revived and glorified. There is a problem, however: "Certain churches preserve as a relic a small amount of Christ's blood. His body is therefore not revived in the integrity of all its parts." Solution: "As for the blood that certain churches preserve as a relic, it did not flow from the side of Christ, but miraculously, they say, from an image of Christ (*imagine Christi*) that someone had struck."⁴² It is therefore *imaginary* blood. And no less miraculous for that.

40. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catéchèses mystagogiques*, ed. Piedagnel, Cerf, Paris, 1966, II, p. 1.

41. Cf. Wilson, *Le Suaire de Turin*, pp. 101-105.

42. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, III, Qu. 54. Art. 3.

*Adolfas Mekas (left) and Jonas Mekas during the shooting
of Guns of the Trees, 1961.*



Interview with Jonas Mekas

SCOTT MacDONALD

This interview was recorded in two sessions in December, 1982, and January, 1983. It was transcribed and edited the following summer and fall. Early in 1984 Mekas checked it for accuracy, and I made final revisions.

From the beginning, my goal was to talk to Mekas about his own films, rather than about his well-known activities as an organizer and polemicist for the New American Cinema.

Scott MacDonald: Though *Lost Lost Lost* wasn't finished until 1975, it has the earliest footage I've seen in any of your films.

Jonas Mekas: The earliest footage in that film comes from late 1949. *Lost Lost Lost* was edited in 1975 because I couldn't deal with it until then. I couldn't figure out how to edit the early footage.

MacDonald: When you were recording that material, were you just putting it onto reels and storing it?

Mekas: I had prepared a short film from that footage in late 1950. It was about 20 minutes long, and it was called *Grand Street*. It's one of the main streets in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, populated mainly by immigrants, where we spent a lot of time. Around 1960 I took that film apart. It doesn't exist anymore. Otherwise, I didn't do anything with that footage. Occasionally I looked at it, thinking how I would edit it. I could not make up my mind what to eliminate and what to leave in. But in 1975 it was much easier.

MacDonald: Is that opening passage in *Lost Lost Lost*, where you and Adolfas are fooling around with the Bolex, really your first experience with a camera?

Mekas: What you see there is our very first footage, shot on Lorimer Street, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

MacDonald: Were you involved at all with film before you got to this country?

Mekas: The end of the war found us in Germany. Two shabby, naive Lithuanian boys, just out of forced labor camp. We spent four years in various displaced persons camps—Flensburg, Hamburg, Wiesbaden, Kassel, etc.—first in the British zone, then in the American zone. There was nothing to do and a lot of time. What we could do was read, write, and go to movies. Movies were shown in the camps free, by the American army. Whatever money we could get we spent on books, or we went into town and saw the postwar German productions. Later, when we went to study at the University of Mainz, which was in the French zone—we commuted from Wiesbaden—we saw a lot of French films.

The movies that really got us interested in film were not the French productions, but the postwar, neorealistic German films. They are not known here—films by Käutner, Josef V. Baky, Liebeneiner, and others. The only way they could make films after the war in Germany was by shooting on actual locations. The war had ended, but the realities were still all around. Though the stories were fictional and melodramatic, their visual texture was drab reality, the same as in the postwar Italian films.

Then we started reading the literature on film, and we began writing scripts. What caused us to write our first script was a film—I do not remember the title or who made it, but it was about displaced persons. We thought it was so melodramatic and had so little understanding of what life in postwar Europe was like that we got very mad and decided we should make a film. My brother wrote a script. Nothing ever was done with it. We had no means, we had no contacts, we were two zeroes.

MacDonald: When you were first starting to shoot here did you feel that you were primarily a recorder of displaced persons and their struggle, or were you already thinking about becoming a filmmaker of another sort?

Mekas: The very first script that we wrote when we arrived in late 1949, and which was called *Lost Lost Lost Lost* (i.e., four *Lost's* as opposed to the three of the 1975 version), was for a documentary on the life of displaced persons here. We wanted to bring some facts to people's attention. It did not have to do so much with the fact that we were displaced persons, or that there were displaced persons. It had more to do with the fact that the Baltic republics—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania—were sacrificed by the West to the Soviet Union at Yalta just before the end of the war and ended up as occupied countries to which we could not return. We were taking a stand for the three Baltic countries that the West had betrayed. Our script was an angry outcry. It was our first English script. We sent it to Flaherty, thinking he could help us produce it, but he wrote back that

though he liked the script and found it full of passion, he could not help us. This was at a time when he couldn't find money to produce even his own films.

We did start shooting nevertheless. Actually, two or three shots at the beginning of *Lost Lost Lost* are from the original footage we shot for that film. A slow-motion shot of a soldier (actually, Adolfas) and one or two others (a family reading a newspaper, a skating rink, a tree in Central Park) were meant for that film. But my brother was drafted and so we abandoned the project. When he came back from the army a year or so later, things had changed.

MacDonald: During all the intervening time you were recording other material?

Mekas: Yes, I was collecting, documenting, without a clear plan or purpose, the activities of displaced persons — mainly Lithuanians. I shot footage of New York immigrant communities, and I did some weekend traveling to record communities in Chicago, Toronto, Philadelphia, Boston. I worked in Brooklyn factories and spent all my money on film.

MacDonald: A lot of the footage that ended up in the first reel of *Lost Lost Lost* is compositionally and texturally very beautiful. When you were shooting originally, were you thinking about the camera as a potential poetic instrument?

Mekas: The intention was to capture the situations very directly, with the simple means that we had at our disposal. All the indoor footage was taken with just one or two flood lamps. We made no attempt to light the "scenes" "correctly" or "artistically." Sometimes we were at meetings — actually, most of the time — where we couldn't interfere, or we were too shy to interfere.

During the first weeks after our arrival here, we had read Pudovkin and Eisenstein, so in the back of our minds there was probably something else, a different ambition, but I don't think that that footage reveals much. In Germany we had bought a still camera and had taken a lot of stills. Maybe that affected how we saw and the look of some of the footage. We also looked at a lot of still photography. In 1953 or so I began working at a place called Graphic Studios, a commercial photography studio, where I stayed for five or six years. The studio was run by Lenard Perskie, from whom I learned a great deal. All the great photographers used to drop in, and some artists, like Archipenko.

In 1950 we began attending Cinema 16 screenings. By this I mean absolutely every screening of the so-called experimental films. We also attended every screening of the Theodore Huff Society, which was run at that time by the young Bill Everson. He showed mostly early Hollywood and European films which were unavailable commercially. I think it's still going on, but I haven't been there for years. It's one of the noble, dedicated undertakings — a University of Cinema — of William Everson, who has performed a great educational role for nearly three decades.

MacDonald: I asked the question about your using the camera as a poetic device because by the second reel there are shots in which it's clear that more is happening than documentation. I'm thinking of the beautiful sequence of the woman pruning trees, and the shot of Adolfas in front of the merry-go-round.

Mekas: That shot of Adolfas was intended for our first "poetic" film. It had a title: *A Silent Journey*. We never finished it and some of the footage appears in reel three of *Lost Lost Lost*—the film within the film about the car crash.

MacDonald: Were you collecting sound at this time too?

Mekas: We were collecting sound, but between 1950 and 1955 this amounted to very little. After 1955 I collected more and more sounds from the situations I filmed.

MacDonald: The early reels are punctuated by images of typed pages. Were you writing a record of your feelings during that time?

Mekas: Those pages are from my written diaries which I kept regularly between



Jonas Mekas in Lost Lost Lost (1950).

the time I left Lithuania (1944) until maybe 1960. Later I got too involved in other activities — the Film-Makers' Cooperative, *Film Culture*, the Cinematheque, etc. — and the written diaries become more and more infrequent.

MacDonald: Did you know English when you arrived here?

Mekas: I could read. I remember reading Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* on the boat as we came over. Hemingway is one of the easiest writers to read because of the simplicity and directness of his language. He is still one of my favorite writers. So I could read and communicate, but writing took another few years. To write in an acquired language is more difficult than to read, as you know, and I am still learning. Until the mid-fifties I kept all my notes in Lithuanian. For another two to three years there is a slow dissolve: on some days my notes were taken in Lithuanian and on other days I wrote in English. By 1957 all the diaries and notes are in English.

My poetry remains in Lithuanian. I have tried — mostly fooling around — to write "poetry" in English, but I do not believe that one can write poetry in any language but the one in which one grew up as a child. One can never master all the nuances of words and groupings of words that are necessary for poetry. Certain kinds of prose can be written, though, as Nabokov has shown.

MacDonald: Conrad's prose often has the suggestiveness and density of poetry.

Mekas: Conrad was much younger when he left his home and he was immediately cut off from all the other Poles. I think it helped very much that he had all those years on the ship. My brother mastered English much faster than I because he found himself in the army with no Lithuanians around. Of course, I am not talking about our accents. The Eastern European pronunciation requires a completely different mouth muscle structure than that of the English language. And it takes a lot of time for the mouth muscles to rearrange themselves.

MacDonald: When you came to put *Lost Lost Lost* together in its present form, did you then go back to the journals and film pages with that film in mind or had those pages been filmed much earlier?

Mekas: I filmed the pages during the editing. When I felt that some aspect of that period was missing from the images, I would go through the audio tapes and the written diaries. They often contained what my footage did not.

Also, as it developed into its final form, *Lost Lost Lost* became autobiographical: I became the center. The immigrant community is there, but it's shown through my eyes. Not unconsciously, but consciously, formally. When I originally filmed that footage, I did not make myself the center. I tried to film

in a way that would make the community central. I thought of myself only as the recording eye. My attitude was still that of an old-fashioned documentary filmmaker of the '40s or '50s and so I purposely kept the personal element out as much as I could. By the time of the editing, in 1975, however, I was preoccupied by the autobiographical. The written diaries allowed me to add a personal dimension to an otherwise routine, documentary recording.

MacDonald: Your detachment from the Lithuanian community in reels one and two seems to go beyond the documentarian's "objective" stance.

Mekas: I was already detached from the Lithuanian community—not from Lithuania, but from the immigrant community, which had written us off probably as early as 1948 or even earlier, when we were still in Germany, in the DP camps. The nationalists—there were many military people among the displaced persons—thought that we were communists and that we should be thrown out of the displaced persons camp. The main reason for that, I think, was that we always hated the army. We were very antimilitaristic. We always laughed and made jokes about the military. Another thing that seemed to separate us from the Lithuanian community was that we did not follow the accepted literary styles of that time. We were publishing a literary magazine in Lithuanian, which was, as far as they were concerned, an extreme, modernist manifestation. So we were outcasts; we were not in the mainstream of the Lithuanian community. That was one of the reasons why we moved out of Brooklyn into Manhattan. I was recording the Lithuanian community, but I was already seeing it as an outsider. I was still sympathetic to its plight, but my strongest interests already were film and literature. We'd finish our work in a factory in Long Island City at 5:00 P.M. and without washing our faces, we'd rush to the subway to catch the 5:30 screening at the Museum of Modern Art. To the other Lithuanians we were totally crazy.

MacDonald: You begin *Lost Lost Lost* with your buying the camera, which does end up recording the Lithuanian community, but the camera is also suggestive of an interest which has come *between* you and that community.

Mekas: Yes, recording the community was part of mastering new tools. It was practice. If one has a camera and wants to master it, then one begins to film in the street or in the apartment. We figured, if we were going to film the streets, why not collect some useful material about the lives of the Lithuanian immigrants. We had several scripts that called for documentary material. One of them required footage from many countries. My brother took a lot of footage for that film in Europe, while he was in the army.

But, basically, at that time our dream was Hollywood. Fictional, theatrical film—not documentary. We thought in terms of making movies for every-

body. In those days if one thought about making films for neighborhood theaters, one thought in terms of Hollywood. We dreamed we would earn some money, and borrow some from friends, and would be able to make our films, our "Hollywood" films. Very soon we discovered that nobody wanted to lend us any money. So we began to send our scripts to Hollywood. I remember sending one to Fred Zinnemann and another to Stanley Kramer. We got them back; I don't know whether they were ever read. Now one can see that our first scripts were not Hollywood scripts at all; they were avant-garde scripts. But we naively thought we could get backing for the films we were dreaming of.

Luckily, just around that time, in New York, there were some people, like Morris Engel and Sidney Meyers, who were beginning to make a different kind of cinema, who began breaking away from Hollywood. We saw *The Little Fugitive* and it made us aware of different possibilities. Before we arrived here, we were completely unaware of avant-garde film, of anything other than commercial film. As we were entering adolescence, when we might have become interested in such things, the war came, and the occupations by the Soviets, then the Germans, then the Soviets again. There was no information, no possibility at all for us to become aware of the other kind of cinema. The Russians came with their official cinema; then the Germans with theirs. After the war the United States army came with Tarzan and melodrama. Our film education was very slow. In late 1947, and in 1948, when we were studying at the University of Mainz, we were very excited by *Beauty and the Beast* and a few other French films. But that's about it.

MacDonald: Is there some reason why you included almost no explicit information about your film interest in those first two reels—other than the obvious fact of your making the footage we're seeing? When I originally saw reel three and the intertitle, "FILM CULTURE IS ROLLING ON LAFAYETTE STREET," I was surprised: it seemed to come out of nowhere.

Mekas: I have no real explanation for that. I figure, the professional life, even if it's a filmmaker's, is not photogenic. There are certain crafts, professions that are photogenic—to me—such as, for instance, bread making, farming, fishing, street works, cutting wood, coal mining, etc. Technological crafts and professions are not photogenic. Another reason is that until 1960 or so, no filmmaker was really filming his or her own life. Whatever one was filming was always outside of one's life—in my case, the Lithuanian community or New York streets. The diaristic, autobiographical preoccupations did not really exist. The personal lives of the whole first wave of American experimental filmmakers are not recorded on film. There is a little bit of Dwinell Grant, fooling in front of the camera. Francis Lee has footage of himself and some of his friends. But the personal had not yet become a concern. As a result, in *Lost Lost Lost* you do not see much of my own life until later. One didn't go to parties with the camera. If

I had taken my Bolex to any of Maya Deren's parties and started filming, they would have laughed. Serious filmmaking was still scripted filmmaking.

MacDonald: Who were the first people you ran into who were using film in more personal ways?

Mekas: My first contacts with the New York film-viewing community began very early. The second or third evening after I arrived here, I went to a screening of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* sponsored by the New York Film Society, which was run at that time by Rudolf Arnheim. Then we went to Cinema 16, but we did not meet any filmmakers there: we were just two shabby DPs watching films. When I heard that Hans Richter was in New York, running the film department at City College, I wrote him a letter saying that I had no money, but would like to attend some classes. He wrote back, "Sure, come!" So I did and I met Hans Richter. I did not take any of his classes—actually, he did not teach any classes that winter—but I met many people: Shirley Clarke, Gideon Bachmann, Frank Kuentler, the poet, and others. I continued seeing Gideon, and we decided—it was his idea—to start our own film group. It was called The Film Group. Beginning in 1951 we had screenings once a month, sometimes more often. We rented films, mostly experimental, avant-garde films. I wrote many of the program notes. Through those screenings we met other people interested in filmmaking. Another person very active during those years (between 1950 and 1955) was Perry Miller, who has lately made several important documentaries—one on Gertrude Stein, *When This You See, Remember Me*. She was running an international festival of films on art, a very big event, at Hunter College. She held at least three of these events, in 1952, 1953, and, I think, in 1954. I saw Resnais's early films there, and some films by local filmmakers. I remember a pattern film by John Arvonio, who filmed reflections in the rain in Times Square. Nobody knows that film anymore. I don't know if it still exists. Also, no one seems to hear any longer of Wheaton Gelantine or Joe Slavin, or Peter Hollander, who distributed early films by Jordan Belson and others through a distribution center called Kinesis.

We undertook two or three documentary film projects with Gideon Bachmann. One was a documentary about modern architecture in a community not very far outside of New York called Usonia. I shot two or three rolls on the Frank Lloyd Wright buildings there. I think Gideon has that footage; I don't. In 1953 I ran a short film series at the Gallery East, on First Street and Avenue B, a Gallery run by Joel Baxter and Louis Brigante. In 1954 my brother and I started our own film society called Film Forum. George Capsis was the third member. We had screenings for two years. At one of our first shows—a Jordan Belson show, with Belson present—we clashed with the projectionists' union. They came and cut off the electricity. When we wanted to continue, they threatened to beat us up, so we had to stop the screening.

MacDonald: Returning to *Lost Lost Lost*, the color in the first two reels is gorgeous.

Mekas: Much of it is time's effect on the early Kodachrome. I didn't like it in the original color. As it began aging, I liked it much more and decided to use it. I remember having a similar experience with Gregory Markopoulos's trilogy, *Psyche, Charmides, Lysis*. It seemed to me to become more and more wonderful as time went on. When some people looked at it later, they said, "It's horrible, what's happened to the color." But I found the later color superior to the original.

MacDonald: I assume that that process will continue.

Mekas: Yes. Even though I have a master now, on Ektachrome, the Ektachrome itself changes rapidly. The print stocks keep changing. And, of course, the color changed in the transfer from the original Kodachrome into the Ektachrome master. So there is no such thing as original color anymore. Every stage is original, in a way.

MacDonald: It seems to me that your varied use of intertitles has always been a strong formal element in your films.

Mekas: I was always faced with the problem of how to structure, how to formalize the personal material, which seems just to run on and on. It's so close to me that I have to use abstract devices, numbers, or descriptive intertitles, to make it more distant, easier for me to deal with, to make the footage seem more as if someone else—maybe Lumière—were recording it.

MacDonald: You mentioned that you feel that you can't be a poet in English, and yet both in the spoken narrative passages (in *Lost Lost Lost* especially, but also as early as *Walden* [1968]) and also in the printed intertitles, your spoken or visual phrasing evokes several American poets—William Carlos Williams, for example, and Walt Whitman.

Mekas: But those passages are not poetry. They are poetic, yes, which is a different thing. By the way, I wanted to make a documentary about William Carlos Williams. In 1954 or 1955 I made some notes, visited Williams in Paterson, and discussed the film with him. I wanted to make a film about his life there in Paterson. He was supposed to prepare some notes about what he wanted to have in the film. I lost my notes; probably his estate would know if his still exist, if, that is, he made any. I took LeRoi Jones (Baraka) with me. He may remember more about that trip.

MacDonald: Had you read Whitman by this time?



Edouard de Laurot, Adolfas Mekas, and Arlene Croce in Lost Lost Lost (1956).



Allen Ginsberg and LeRoi Jones (Baraka) in Lost Lost Lost (1958).

Mekas: I had read Whitman in German translation in 1946 or 1947. Later I read some in English. By 1950 I had read it all. I had even translated some of his poems, or rather, had tried to translate them into Lithuanian. During those periods Whitman *was* important to me, along with Sandburg and Auden. Later I gravitated toward other preferences. I haven't read Sandburg for decades, but there's a lot in him that is very appealing.

MacDonald: *Lost Lost Lost* seems to be divided not only into six reels but into three pairs of two reels, each of which has the same general organization: the first tends to be about personal and family life, the second about the political context of that personal and family life.

Mekas: That footage is largely in chronological order, though I took some liberties here and there. I worked with it as one huge piece. I kept looking at it, eliminating bits and dividing it up in one way and another. I didn't plan on six reels originally, in fact I had seven or eight at one point, but figured that that was too much to view in one sitting. I considered three hours the maximum for a single sitting.

MacDonald: When the unfinished film-within-the-film that you show at the beginning of reel three was originally made, did you conceive of it as a sort of parable of your own experience as a DP?

Mekas: No. That film was very much influenced by my viewing experimental



Peter Bogdanovich in Lost Lost Lost (1960).



Gretchen Berg in Lost Lost Lost (1963).

films at Cinema 16. I wanted to make my first consciously “poetic” little film. At that point I thought it was totally invented and outside of me. All I wanted was that it be very, very simple, just one moment from somebody’s life, a memory.

MacDonald: In that passage, as it appears in *Lost Lost Lost*, you seem to be developing a parallel between yourself and the protagonist. Both of you go to the woods to walk off the pain of your losses.

Mekas: Now, from the perspective of years, I can see that connection.

MacDonald: In reel three you begin to develop the more gestural camera style with which, after *Walden*, many people identified you. In later reels the gestural camera becomes increasingly evident, so that the film as a whole seems, in part, about the emergence of that style.

Mekas: It’s more complicated than that. My first major work in Lithuanian, which to some of my Lithuanian friends is still the best thing I’ve done, was a cycle of twenty-odd idylls I wrote in 1946. I used long lines and an epic pace to portray my childhood in the village. I described the people in the village and their various activities during the four seasons, as factually and prosaically as I could. I avoided what was accepted as poetic Lithuanian language. My aim at that time — I talk about this in my written diaries — was to achieve “a documentary poetry.” When I began filming, that interest did not leave me, but it was pushed aside as I got caught up in the documentary film traditions. I was read-

ing Grierson and Rotha and looking at the British and American documentary films of the '30s and '40s. I feel now that their influence detoured me from my own inclination. Later, I had to shake this influence in order to return to the approach with which I began.

Now that I am transcribing all my written diaries, I notice that already in the '40s there are pages and pages of observations of what I've seen through windows, what I've heard in the street — a series of disconnected, collaged impressions. If one compares my camera work with those pages, one sees that they are almost identical. I only changed my tools.

MacDonald: That's interesting. I had assumed that your gestural camera represented the development of an American film style, growing out of your progressive acculturation.

Mekas: [*Looks through his diaries.*] Here's an example, written when I was in the Schwaebisch Gmuend DP camp, about three months before I came to this country:

May 17, 1949

8 P.M.

Two drunks are walking along the street.

"Let's go, let's go . . ."

"Where do you want to go?"

"What? It's raining."

"Let's go to the Truman street, joptvaimat (a Russian curse)."

They have a silent exchange, I can't hear it.

"You told me that you have it, you prick."

They both walk away.

A woman comes through rain, pressing a large empty plate to her side. Down the corners of buildings noisily run streams of rain water. At the other end of the street — music, boyan. A man in green pants, his hands in pockets, runs by, his head pulled into his shoulders, wet. A girl runs by. A voice from the window:

"Where are you running? Lost your key?"

The man in the window is whistling, the girl keeps running without acknowledging him and without turning back.

A man, all wet, slowly walks by, I know him, it's Grazys. Another man, in grey suit, black hat, his hands in trouser pockets, lifting them up so that the bottoms wouldn't get too soaked. Through the window I can hear a man's voice singing:

"O, Zuzana, sirdis mana,

*koks gyvenimas grazus”
(Oh, Susanne, my sweetheart,
how wonderful is life—).*

No change in the sky, but it looks like it's raining less. The puddles in the street, little streams, brooks of rain water rush along the edges of the street, down. Camp policeman with a new MP uniform. In the window—heads. Women, children.

MacDonald: In reels two and three of *Lost Lost Lost*, you seem very lonely, and yet you were obviously very busy with many people—which emphasizes the fact that there's a sizeable gap between yourself as maker and as protagonist.

Mekas: When I read my written diaries, I see that I was very, very lonely during those early years, more so than, say, the average Italian immigrant. There's an established Italian community here which one can become part of. It's lonely, but not that lonely. Italian immigrants know they can go back to Italy if things don't work out. Once we left what Lithuanian community there was in New York, and moved to Orchard Street, we were very much alone. One of the reasons why I went to City College for a few months was to meet new people. I could not stand just walking the streets by myself. My brother was in the army. For two years I had no friends, nobody. If I had been a communicative, friendly person, it might have been different. But I was never that kind of person. I was always very closed and extremely shy. Actually, I still am, but I have learned techniques to cover it. At thirteen or fourteen I was so shy that when finally, for some reason, I began speaking to people—other than members of my family—everybody was amazed: “He speaks! He speaks! Really, he speaks!” This shyness did not disappear all at once. Even though we started publishing *Film Culture* and went to film screenings, we'd go home and be alone. We were still thinking about Lithuania. Our mother was there, our father, and all our brothers. Until Stalin died we could not even correspond.

I did a lot of walking in this new country, but as yet I had no memories from it. It takes years and years to build and collect new memories. After a while the streets begin to talk back to you and you are not a stranger any longer, but this takes years. That experience is not pleasant to go through and so it's not always reflected in my footage, though it's in the diaries. I put it into the film later, by means of my “narration,” or, more correctly, my “talking.”

MacDonald: Some of it comes through in the mood of those images.

Mekas: Some, yes.

MacDonald: I showed Marie Menken's *Notebook* recently, and noticed not only a

feeling similar to the one in your work, but a similar use of tiny passages of text as a means of contextualizing and distancing personal footage.

Mekas: Oh, yes. I liked what she did and I thought it worked. She helped me make up my mind about how to structure my films. Besides, Marie Menken was Lithuanian. Her mother and father were Lithuanian immigrants, and she still spoke some Lithuanian. We used to get together and sing Lithuanian folk songs. When she'd sing them, she'd go back to the old country completely. So there might also be some similarities in our sensibilities because of that. But definitely Marie Menken helped me to be at peace enough to leave much of the original material just as it was.

And John Cage. From him I learned that chance is one of the great editors. You shoot something one day, forget it, shoot something the next day and forget the details of that . . . When you finally string it all together and watch for ten minutes, you discover all sorts of connections. I thought at first that I should do more editing and not rely on chance. But I came to realize that, of course, there is no chance: whenever you film, you make certain decisions, even when you don't know that you do. The most essential, the most important editing—frame by frame editing—takes place during the shooting as a result of these decisions.

Before 1960 I tried to edit the material from 1949 to 1955. But I practically destroyed it by tampering with it too much. Later, in 1960 or 1961, I spent a long time putting it *back* to the way it was originally. After that I was afraid to touch it, and I didn't touch it until 1975.

MacDonald: It's in the fifth reel of *Lost Lost Lost* that you seem, for the first time, to be back in touch with rural life and with the land.

Mekas: Yes, that's where the "lost lost lost" ends. I'm beginning to feel at home again. By reel six one cannot say that I feel lost anymore; paradise has been regained through cinema.

MacDonald: It's the paradise of having a place where you can work and struggle for something that you care about?

Mekas: When you enter a whole world where you feel at home. A world for which you care. Or, a world which takes you over, possesses you, obsesses you, and pushes all the other worlds into the shadow. Still, I don't think that I'll ever be able, really and completely, to detach myself from what I really am, somewhere very deep: a Lithuanian.

MacDonald: Did you live in Vermont for a while?

Mekas: We lived in Vermont for two seasons, during the filming of *Hallelujah the Hills* (1963).

MacDonald: Reel five is exhilarating in its use of light and texture. And you take some chances by allowing yourself to be very vulnerable: you allow yourself to look foolish.

Mekas: I realized I was taking chances. I have to give credit here again — one is always taking lessons — to Gregory Markopoulos. Gregory had taken chances that I thought wouldn't work, but he always managed to pull through. I don't know how familiar you are with Markopoulos's work; it's practically impossible to see it these days — he doesn't show it in America. I learned from Gregory that what seems embarrassingly personal soon after a film is made, later comes to be part of the content, and not embarrassing at all.

Another lesson came from Dostoevsky, from a statement of his that I read when I was fifteen or sixteen and which I have never forgotten. A young writer complained to Dostoevsky that his own writing was too subjective, too personal and that he would give anything to learn to write more objectively. Dostoevsky replied — this is my memory; I may have adapted it totally to my own purpose, it's not a quotation: "The main problem of the writer is not how to escape subjectivity, but rather how to be subjective, how really to write from one's self, to be oneself in language, form, and content. I challenge you to be subjective!" It is very difficult to be openly subjective. One has to keep it within formal limits, of course; one must not wallow in subjectivity. Perhaps I come very close to that sometimes. . . .

MacDonald: Did the fact that 1976 was the American Bicentennial year have any impact on the making of *Lost Lost Lost*? It does tell a quintessentially American story.

Mekas: *Lost Lost Lost* was completed because the New York State Council on the Arts (maybe because of the Bicentennial) decided to give four very special \$20,000 grants. Harry Smith got one too. Suddenly I had enough money and I said, "This is my chance."

It's amazing, when one thinks about it: everybody says — and it's quite true — that this country is made of immigrants, that America is a melting pot, etc. But it's not reflected very often in American literature. There is no major work that really documents the immigrant experience. Sinclair's *The Jungle* is the closest we have that I know of. *Lost Lost Lost* is a record of certain immigrant realities that have been largely ignored in art.

MacDonald: *Guns of the Trees* (1961) is probably the closest of your films to a recognizably commercial narrative. What was the background of that project?



Jonas Mekas. Guns of the Trees. 1961.

Mekas: First I wrote a sketchy, poetic script that consisted of thirty sequences. I wanted to improvise around those sketches, and that's what we set out to do. "We" means Adolfas and I. We had agreed to assist each other on our own productions: first I'd make a film, and he'd help; next he'd make a film, and I'd help. He helped me on *Guns*, and I helped him on *Hallelujah*. The only thing that went wrong, and really very badly wrong, was that at that time we had a friend, Edouard de Laurot, who wanted very much to be involved in the film as well. From solidarity and friendship, we decided to invite him to work with us. He was a brilliant person, but very self-centered and very dictatorial. Edouard's position was that absolutely every movement, every word, every thing that appeared in the film should be totally controlled and politically meaningful. I tended, even at that time, to be much more open; I was interested in improvisation, chance, accidents. I was too inexperienced and unsure of myself to push through with my own shy vision. So often I did things Edouard's way. It came to the point, finally, that we had to part, to end the friendship. This was an important lesson for me: it was clear that I had to work alone in the future. I was never happy with that film.

MacDonald: How did you come to make *The Brig* (1964)?

Mekas: I wanted to make a film in which sound was about as important as the image. I was attracted by the sounds of *The Brig*—the stamping and running and shouting. It was a staged reality that was very much like life itself. I thought I could go into it the way a news cameraman would go into a situation in real life. Cinéma vérité was very much in the air at that time. People connected truth to cinéma vérité camera technique: style produced an illusion of truth. I made the film, in a sense, as a critique of cinéma vérité.

At that time the most widely used newsreel camera was the single system Auricon. You could record the sound in the camera during the shooting on magnetic sound-striped film stock. I rented three cameras and shot the film in one session, in ten-minute takes. Two days earlier, when I went to see the play on stage, the idea of making the film shot through my mind so fast that I decided not to see the play through to the end. That way, when I filmed I would not know what was coming next: the opposite of the usual situation in which the filmmaker studies and maps the action in an attempt to catch the essence of the play. I went to Julian Beck and told him that I wanted to film the play. He said this would be impossible since it was being closed the next day. The police had ordered it closed on the pretext that the taxes had not been paid. I decided that I wanted to do it anyway; I only needed a day to collect the equipment. We concocted a plan to sneak into the building after the play had been closed and begin shooting.

It was so sudden, an obsession. The cast got into the building at night, through the coal chute. So did we, my little crew—Ed Emshwiller, Louis Brigante, with our equipment. Shooting was very intense. I had to film and watch the play at the same time. Most of the time I did not even look through the camera. I'd finish with one camera, grab the next one, and continue. I'd have to yell out to the actors to stop while I changed cameras. Ed and Louis loaded the cameras while I shot.

MacDonald: Did you assume that people who saw the film would not know the play?

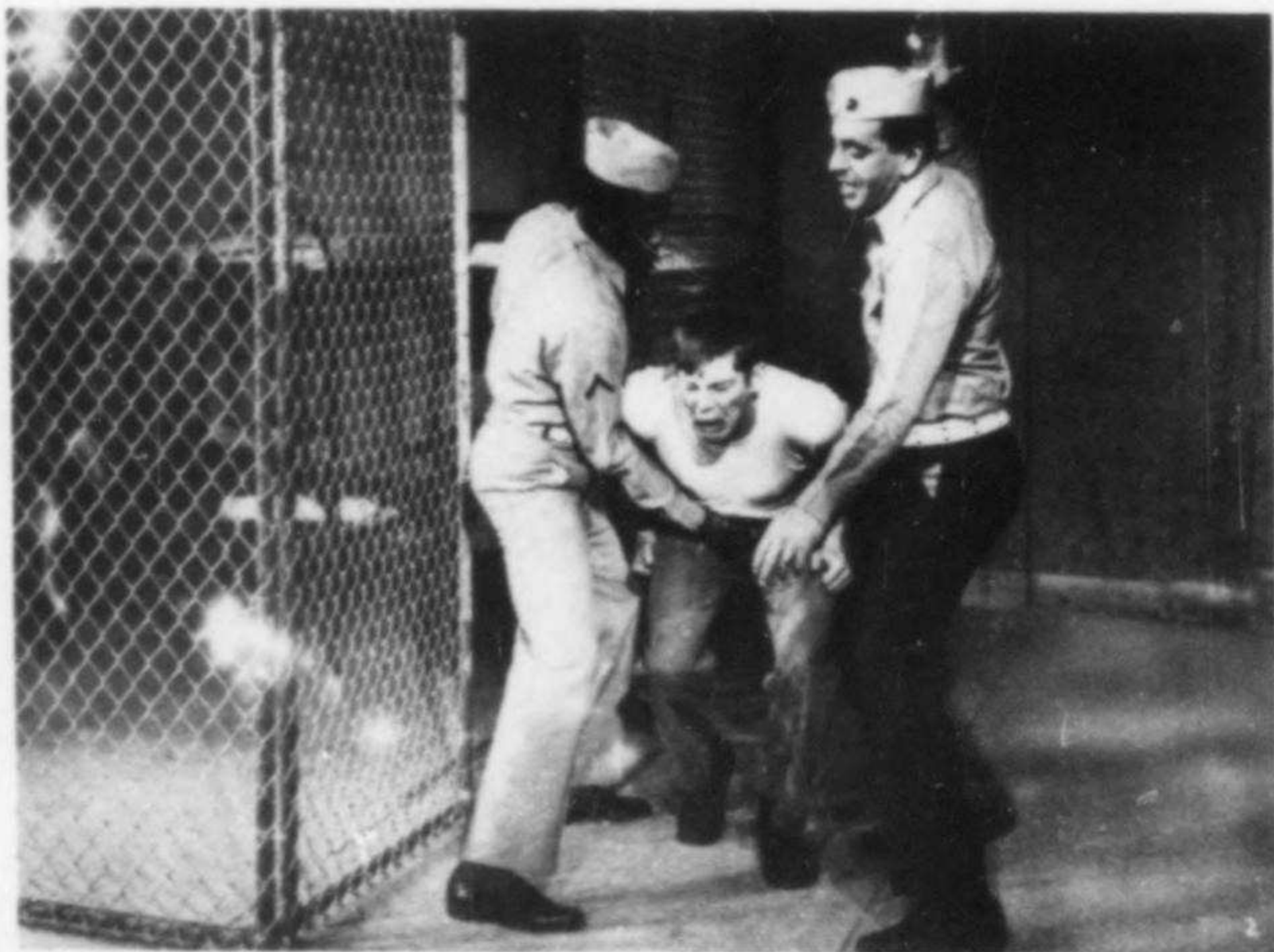
Mekas: No. Some of the people who later saw the film had seen the play. But among the people who were not familiar with the play some were actually fooled by the "amateur" style. They thought that the United States army had permitted me to go into a real brig and make the film. This was the case with some Italian newspapers.

MacDonald: The credits say that you shot the film and Adolfas edited it. How much was edited out? Was the play just an hour long?

Mekas: The editing involved was technical work. When I would run out of film and grab another camera, the actors would stop and overlap a little bit. I liked the film with the overlaps, and actually the first screening included them. The Living Theater liked it that way too. But David and Barbara Stone, who were at that point beginning to get involved in distribution, agreed to distribute it, and for distribution's sake, we decided to eliminate the overlappings. My brother took care of this. He had just come back from Chicago, where he did the editing and salvaging of *Goldstein*. Also, though I shot the sound on film, I had a separate tape recorder running independently, for safety's sake. We decided to intensify the sound in certain places by merging the two soundtracks. My brother did that. Also, one camera was always slowing down towards the end of a roll, so we had to replace those parts of sound with the separate recording, or resplice it practically frame by frame. There was a lot of that kind of subtle technical work, which my brother does very well.

As far as the play itself is concerned, I filmed the whole thing. There were parts, however, which worked on stage, but didn't work so well on film. As in real life—some of it was just too boring to film. As documentary as the play is, towards the end it becomes more theatrical: acting and melodramatic lines I couldn't do anything with. I decided to cut those parts out. The people from the Living Theater were not too happy about this decision at first, but eventually they accepted the changes, and now they're very happy with the film. The play ran approximately ninety minutes. I cut out about twenty minutes.

MacDonald: There's a weird dimension to the play: it has to be as rigorously unrelenting in its production as a real brig would be. The people who "play" the marines were, I assume, as demanding on themselves and each other as real marines would be—maybe more so, depending on how long the play ran.



Adolfas Mekas and Jonas Mekas. The Brig. 1964.

Mekas: I think the play ran for about a year. All those punches were real; they were rehearsed, but real. Every actor had to know the parts of all the other actors so that they could rotate roles. I'll be punched tonight, and you'll be punched tomorrow. They were incredibly dedicated to their theater.

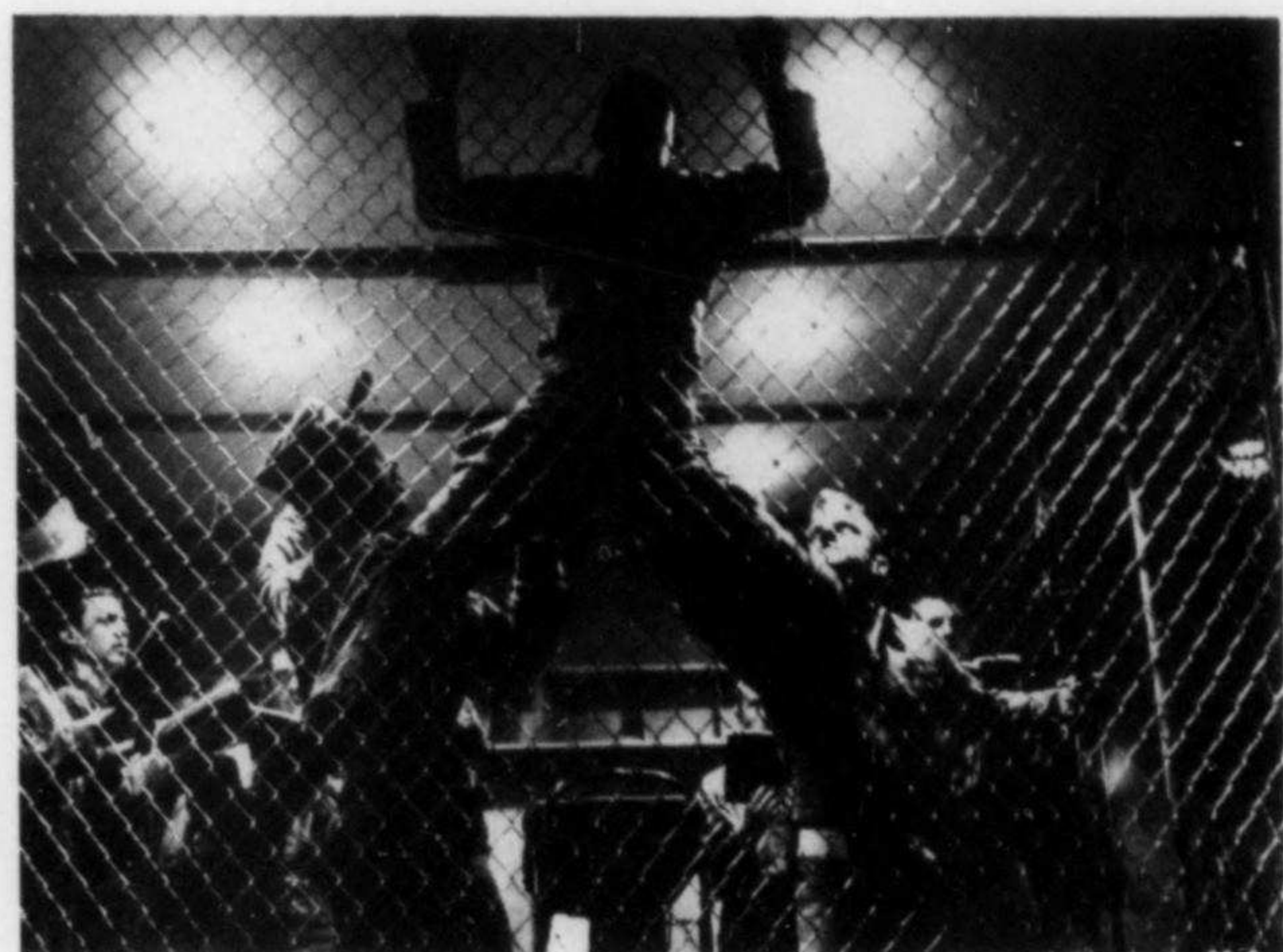
MacDonald: What's interesting to me is that it's the same performance as the real thing. It's just in a different context.

Mekas: That's why I wanted to film it. It could be treated as reality, though actually the play was not as intense as the film. I intensified it by picking out certain details, by cutting out dead spaces, and by the movements of the camera. Still, for the theatergoer of that period, *The Brig* was a very intense experience. In 1967 or 1968 I was invited to the University of Delaware to see their production of *The Brig*. Kenneth Brown, the author of the play, was there too. The production, from all I remember, was pretty intense. But it didn't have the same impact on the audience as the original performances did. To have the same effect in 1968 you had to be two or three times more shocking. Society had become more brutalized.

I should add another footnote here. In the late '60s, a TV station in Berlin did their own version of the play. They planned it all very carefully, spent a lot of money on it, took a month to make it — and it was a total dud. It didn't work.

MacDonald: The sound in the film is somewhat rhythmic. Over and over it starts relatively quietly and then builds, finally going past the point of audibility. Was the distortion done on purpose?

Mekas: In one track there was distortion because I was too close to the sound with my camera mike. Also, one camera distorted the sound when it slowed



down. But I decided to keep the distortions. More than that: I combined the tracks to intensify the sound even more. That was one of the major objections at the time I made the film, and I had to overrule it. Noise is very much part of that film. The noise is more important than what's being said.

MacDonald: It's like some kind of horrible music.

Mekas: It's not a pleasant film to see. You don't want to see it twice. You might say, "Oh, I liked it," but you don't want to see it twice.

MacDonald: I have a somewhat personal response to it. My life certainly seems robotized at times. I get up at a certain hour, hurry through breakfast, run to school to teach, and when the bell rings, I walk to the next class. On one level the film is about the military, but it also seems potentially to contain a comment on the discipline we impose on ourselves during much of everyday life. . . . To turn to another film now, what was the nature of your collaboration with Markopoulos on *Award Presentation to Andy Warhol* (1964)?

Mekas: I wanted to give that year's Independent Film Award to Andy Warhol. I had arranged a series of screenings, including Warhol films, at the New Yorker Theater. But he said he didn't want to be on stage or do anything as public as that, so I suggested that we make the award in his studio and that I'd film it. He said that would be okay. We collected some of his superstars of that period and two rolls of film and set it all up. On my way to the studio, I suddenly remembered that I would actually have to award him with something, so I bought a basket of fruit at the corner store. During the actual presentation, I needed someone to operate the camera, which was a motorized Bolex. Gregory happened to be there and said he'd do it. Much of the time he's actually in the film, on the set; the rest of the time he was operating the camera. I slowed down the film in the printing as a form of tribute to Andy: most of his films—actually all the films from that period—were projected at 16 frames per second, though they were shot at 24. I did the same thing, but I had to do it by means of optical reprinting because I wanted to have the sound on the film.

MacDonald: How did you get involved with *Show Magazine*, and *Film Magazine of the Arts* (1963)?

Mekas: Did you see that one?

MacDonald: Yes, it's a nice little film.

Mekas: *Show Magazine* needed a promotional film, and somebody suggested to them that I make it. I agreed to do it. They paid well. I conceived the film as a

serial film magazine that would come out once a month, or once every three months. We shot a lot of footage, with *Show Magazine* people always present, taking us to various places. When I was shooting, I noticed that they were always dropping issues of *Show Magazine* on the floor everywhere. When I screened the first draft of the film for them, they were shocked to see that I had eliminated all those magazines and much of the footage of fashion models they had me shoot (although you see some of that at the very end of the film). So that was the end of that project. I think that the concept of a film magazine, had they really supported me, was a good one and would have received much better publicity than the kind of thing they wanted.

MacDonald: I think that's the first film of yours I saw.

Mekas: There are some parts I like very much; I like the whole thing, really. They seized the original right after the screening. They were planning to hire their own editor to reedit the film their way. They also took all the outtakes, but decided finally not to do anything with it. All my prints are from the work print.

MacDonald: Was the greenish tone of the black-and-white imagery caused by printing black-and-white footage on color stock?

Mekas: That particular tint was my choice.

MacDonald: You used some interesting music by Storm De Hirsch and others.

Mekas: The section with Lucia Dlugoszewski is unique. I think she's an exceptional composer and performer, but she's never been recorded on film.

MacDonald: *Walden* is the film of yours I've seen most often. It's also been around the longest. When I first saw it, I was conscious primarily of the diaristic aspects. But, more recently I've been just as aware of the changing film stocks and the different tintings of the black-and-white footage. It now seems simultaneously an exploration of your personal environment *and* of film materials.

Mekas: Those are all controlled accidents. Some of the stock was used because it was available when I ran out of film. When I was filming the part now entitled "A Visit to Brakhages," I ran out of film, and Stan found some outdated Kodachrome under his bed. It was a very different texture than the surrounding material. Sometimes I ran out of color, so I used black-and-white. I had no plan to explore film stocks. But once you have all those different stocks, then you begin to structure with color; you pay attention to their qualities. The aspect you notice had also to do with my whole approach to film laboratories. You know how paranoid and careful some filmmakers are about labs. Usually the filmmaker

tries to supervise the lab work closely, checking one print and another, refusing prints, switching labs. . . . I don't do that. I consider that whatever happens at the lab is what I want. I don't indicate that they should make this part lighter and that darker. I do my work in the camera, and all I ask from the lab is to make a straight, what's known as "one light" print, with no special timing, no anything. Usually I get results that I like. I have never rejected a print. If something goes really wrong, then of course I indicate on the next print that it should be corrected. I think that I have complete control over my materials; I don't leave anything for the labs to do or undo.

MacDonald: You must have had a tremendous amount of diary footage by the time you made *Walden*. How did you come to make that particular film?

Mekas: The Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo had a special celebration — I don't remember the occasion — and they commissioned new works in the fields of music, dance, and film, and maybe some other arts. Film was included at Gerald O'Grady's request; he was the adviser there. I was invited to make a film and given ten months to work on it. I used the material that was easiest for me to put together. The gallery helped to make a print and paid the expenses. The version I screened in Buffalo had sound on tape; it was also slightly shorter than the present version. Later I decided to finish the film and to include some other material.

MacDonald: For me the strongest reel of the four has always been the first. Several sections from that reel are distributed separately.

Mekas: Yes, *Cassis*, *Notes on the Circus*, *Report from Millbrook*, and *Hare Krishna*, all filmed in 1966.

MacDonald: It led me to wonder whether you edited it reel by reel or . . .

Mekas: I worked on the thing as a whole. I put those particular parts into distribution, however, before the rest was finished and before the invitation from Buffalo. Eventually I think I will pull them out of distribution, except for *Cassis* — which is different from the version you see in *Walden* — and *Report from Millbrook*, which is also different.

MacDonald: When did you become familiar with Thoreau's *Walden*?

Mekas: It's one of the books that Peter Beard is obsessed with. During the shooting of *Hallelujah the Hills* he gave me a copy, and when I was editing *Walden*, I always had it around. For a long time I thought that that was the first time I

read it. But recently, while retyping my early diaries from 1948, I discovered that I was reading *Walden* then, in German.

MacDonald: It's sometimes thought of as a book about country living, but Thoreau was living just outside of town. In that sense your use of Central Park as your "Walden Pond" strikes me as particularly appropriate.

Mekas: Not only Central Park. To me Walden exists throughout the city. You can reduce the city to your own very small world which others may never see. The usual reaction after seeing *Walden* is a question: "Is this New York?" Their New York is ugly buildings and depressing, morbid blocks of concrete and glass. That is not my New York. In my New York there is a lot of nature. *Walden* is made up of bits of memories of what I wanted to see. I eliminated what I didn't want to see.

MacDonald: Is New York the first big city you've spent a lot of time in?

Mekas: Yes, the first big *modern* city. All other cities I had been in before coming here—cities like Hamburg or Frankfurt or Kassel—had been destroyed in the war. There wasn't very much of the city left.

MacDonald: By the time you made *Walden* you'd been filming for a long time. Had it gotten to the point where you were deciding in advance that you wanted to go film this or that for a specific film? It's clear that you decided to go to the circus several times for *Notes on the Circus*.

Mekas: No, I didn't plan. I just recorded my reactions to what was happening around me. *Notes on the Circus*—originally I thought I'd get it all the first time. But I got involved in the circus and went three or four times. I decided in advance to film Peter Beard's wedding, but when I arrived, I discovered that my Bolex wasn't working. Peter happened to have a Baulieux camera, so I used that. I had never used it before, so it was very risky.

MacDonald: What is your connection with Peter Beard? He's very prominent in the diaries.

Mekas: I had met him before *Hallelujah the Hills*. He was the cousin of Jerome Hill, whom I knew by that time. We became friends during the shooting of *Hallelujah the Hills*, and the friendship has continued.

MacDonald: In the first reel you say, "I make home movies, therefore I live," a line that's quoted a lot. Had you seen much home-movie making?

Mekas: No. I hadn't seen much 8mm until the Kuchars came on the scene. They brought a few others out into the open. Many millions of cameras were floating around in the country for home-movie making, but no one saw the footage. We did attend amateur club screenings in the late '50s.

MacDonald: All your films are involved with social rituals, but *Walden* seems particularly involved with the specific social rituals that are often the material of home movies: weddings especially.

Mekas: There are a lot of weddings in my diaries. A wedding is a big event in anybody's life; it's colorful and there's always a lot of celebration. As a child, I remembered for years my sister's wedding. Where I come from, weddings go on for a week or two. Occasions like that attract me. There are, of course, no such weddings here. . . . But I film them anyway, hoping to find the wedding of my memory. There are also places to which I keep coming back. One is the Metropolitan Museum. On Saturday and Sunday lots of people sit on its front steps. There is something unique about this and for years I've kept going back, trying to capture the mood which pervades it. I think I finally decided I've gotten what I wanted and I'm not going back again. The autumn in Central Park is also something unique and for years I kept going back to it, but now I think I've gotten that. Winter in Central Park also. . . . And I've filmed a lot of New York rains.

During the period when I was shooting the *Walden* material, I wanted to make a diary film of a teenage girl just leaving childhood and entering adolescence. I was collecting diaries and letters of girls of that age, and making many notes. I wanted to make a film — actually, a series of three or four films, one of a girl fifteen, one of a woman and a man twenty-five; then forty-five; then sixty-five. I never progressed beyond the notes. But on several occasions I took some shots with three or four girls whom I thought I would use in that film. I always filmed them in the park. Some of the young women were friends of friends. I don't even know some of their names. But that's the reason for the repeated shots or sequences of young women in the park.

MacDonald: During the making of *Walden* did you try different types of music with different imagery?

Mekas: By then I was carrying my Nagra or my Sony and picking up sounds from the situations I filmed. There is a long stretch where I did not have any sounds, so I had John Cale play some background music. It's a very insistent, constant sound that goes on for fifteen or twenty minutes. There is no climax; it's continuous, with some small variations.

MacDonald: It works very intricately with the imagery. There are all sorts of



Edie Sedgwick and Lou Reed in Walden.



Andy Warhol in Walden.

subtle connections. Even within the slight variations, a slight motion in the sound may be matched by a parallel motion in the imagery.

Mekas: I should add, or rather reveal a secret: that John Cale sound is tampered with. . . . I doubled the speed. . . . It didn't work as it was. I tried different sounds for different parts. I made many different attempts. Sometimes I had two or three televisions going simultaneously, plus phonograph records and a radio. As I was editing, I was listening and trying to hit on chance connections. The tape recorder was always ready so I could immediately record what might come up.

MacDonald: *Walden* begins with the sound of the subway.

Mekas: There's a lot of subway noise, subway and street noise, in *Walden*. It's a general background in which all the other sounds are planted.

MacDonald: The opening subway sound goes on for a very long time and suggests a rush through time. Then it stops abruptly and the doors open, just as you're waking up and as spring is waking out of winter.

Mekas: I like that noise. It has continued through all the volumes of my film diaries. Also, that was a period when I did a lot of walking, and the street noise was always present.

MacDonald: I assume that, as was true in *Lost Lost Lost*, the material is more or less chronological, though not completely.

Mekas: Yes. I had to shift some parts for simple structural reasons. I did not want two long stretches like *Notes on the Circus* and *Trip to Millbrook* right next to each other. That would be too much; it would throw the structure out of balance. There had to be some separations. I shifted those longer passages around, but in most cases I didn't touch the shorter scenes; they are in chronological order.

MacDonald: The last reel has the John Lennon/Yoko Ono passage. Did you know them?

Mekas: Yes, I knew Lennon. I'd known Yoko since 1959 or 1960 perhaps. Around 1962 she left for Japan, then decided to come back to New York. But she needed a job, for immigration, so *Film Culture* gave her her first official job in this country. We have been friends ever since. I met John after he married Yoko. When they came back from London to settle in New York, they were quite lonely. On their first night I took them for coffee, very late. We could find nothing that was open until eventually we came to Emilio's on Sixth Avenue. We sat and drank Irish coffee. John was very happy that nobody knew him there, nobody bothered him. But just as we were about to leave, a shy, young waitress gave John a scrap of paper and asked for his autograph. She had known all along who he was.

MacDonald: Am I correct in saying that at the time of *Walden* you had a sense that there's always less and less of the basic things that are most valuable in life?

Mekas: There is a very pessimistic passage of "narration" or "talking" in the Central Park sequence where I say that perhaps before too long there won't be any trees or flowers. But I don't mean for that attitude to dominate the entire film. In general I would say that I feel there will always be Walden for those who really want it. Each of us lives on a small island, in a very small circle of reality which is our own reality. I made up a joke about a Zen monk standing in Times Square with people asking, "So what do you think about New York—the noise, the traffic?" The monk says, "What noise? What traffic?" You *can* cut it all out. No, it's not that we can have all this today, but tomorrow it will be gone. It is threatened, but in the end it's up to us to keep those little bits of paradise alive and defend them and see that they survive and grow.

Of course, there is another side to this, another danger. Even in concentration camps, in forced labor camps, people could still find enjoyment in certain things. Not everybody in the forced labor camps sat with his or her nose to the floor, saying, "How dreadful! how dreadful!" There are moments of feeling, happiness, friendships, and even beauty, no matter where you are. So what I said before could be seen as a justification and acceptance of any status quo. I

wouldn't want what I say interpreted that way. Somewhere I would put a limit to what I, or a human being in general, would or should accept. As Gandhi did.

The question is how one is to counteract the destruction. Should one walk around with posters and placards or should one retreat and grow natural food in Vermont and hope that by producing something good, and sharing it with others, one can persuade those others to see the value of what you're doing and to move in a similar direction?

Change can't come from the top. The top, which is occupied by various governments, is totally rotten. This civilization cannot be revolutionized, changed: it has to be *replaced*.

MacDonald: The title of *Walden*, and the titles of other films, I believe, have changed.

Mekas: Yes. *Walden* was originally titled *Diaries, Notes & Sketches* (also known as *Walden*). But now, since I have many other reels of diary material, there is a confusion — at least for the labs. When I was using the title *Diaries, Notes & Sketches: Lost Lost Lost*, they kept writing on the cans *Diaries, Notes & Sketches* and skipping the rest. I had no choice but to rethink the titles. All of my film diaries are *Diaries, Notes & Sketches*, but I now call the individual parts only by their specific names: *Walden*, *Lost Lost Lost*, *In Between*, *Notes for Jerome*, etc.

MacDonald: How does what we see in *In Between* (1978) relate to *Walden* in terms of time period?

Mekas: The *In Between* material is from "in between" *Lost Lost Lost* and *Walden*.

MacDonald: I had thought of the title as a reference to your situation of being partially rooted here, but still Lithuanian . . .

Mekas: Yes, that may be true. It's amazing how much one can hide, unconsciously. A cover-up.

MacDonald: *Walden* is very involved with traveling, whereas in *In Between* there's more home life. And there's a sense of a relationship with a woman.

Mekas: I did not want to make *Walden* too long, and there was a certain pace established there. Several of the sequences in *In Between* are much slower. They're not single framed. I did not want to put that material into *Walden*. After finishing *Walden*, I still thought that I would like to use that footage so I collected it and put it into *In Between*.

I made several versions of *In Between*, one of which I put into distribution, then reedited. It was a difficult film to structure because of the Salvador Dali

footage, which was very different from the other material. I decided finally to separate that part; I put Dali in his place, so to speak, and I used numbering to break it up a bit. It's now one of my favorite films.

MacDonald: You mentioned last time that there was a tremendous amount of material collected in the '50s, only a small portion of which was used in *Lost Lost Lost*. Is the same thing true for the '60s?

Mekas: Maybe a little bit less. In *Lost Lost Lost* I used about one-seventh of the footage I had; in *Walden* and *In Between* I used perhaps a third. *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* was shot about one-to-one. I used everything in the film.

MacDonald: You still have the unused material?

Mekas: I have it all. I may go back some day and make something else with some of it. Some material is not at all bad. But so far it hasn't belonged anywhere. Much of what was not used in the early reels of *Lost Lost Lost* is not so interesting, though it's material of historical importance about immigrant life. It should not be destroyed. Though it's slowly rotting away. . . .

MacDonald: My first experience with *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) was at Hampshire College in 1973. After the screening some guy in the back row screamed at you, "Why can't you leave anything alone!" At the time it was sort of jolting. I'd watched the same film and to me it seemed quite lovely, but it had produced this violent response from this other person. Was that especially unusual?

Mekas: Until ten years ago, that was a very common reaction to single-frame shooting and to short takes, to the use of overexposures or underexposures, and in general to the work of independent filmmakers. There is less and less of that now, since people have gotten used to this type of film language.

MacDonald: *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* is the earliest edited film in which you seem primarily involved with time, in which your return to the past is one of the major themes. There are mentions of the past in *Walden*, but not a direct concentrated involvement with it. Was it that you were going to be able to go back to Lithuania, so the whole issue became more frontal for you?

Mekas: You may be correct. I don't know. It's complicated. The official reaction in the Soviet Union, and all the republics there, is to have no contact with any refugee, exile, DP who left during the war — for no matter what reasons — unless that person is potentially useful to them. I had written already for *Isskustvo Kino*, a film journal in Moscow. Some Soviets had seen *The Brig* in Venice, and the

editor of *Pravda*, who saw it in New York, wrote a glowing review. The film was invited to the Moscow Film Festival and presented there as an important anti-military, anticapitalist work. They sent correspondents from Moscow to interview me here, and interviewed my mother in Lithuania. Suddenly I felt I had enough clout to apply for a visa to visit Lithuania. Since I had been invited to the Moscow Film Festival, I thought I would ask to be permitted to go to Lithuania also, to visit my mother.

For over a decade I had not been allowed even to correspond with my mother. I had written some poems against Stalin, so I was a criminal. My brothers were thrown into jail because of me, and my father died earlier than he would have, because of that. My mother's house was being watched for years, really, by the secret police. They hoped that one day I'd come home and they'd get me. My mother told me that in 1971. There was not a night, during my visit home, when I wasn't prepared to jump out the window, to run from the police if they decided to come after me. And this in 1971, many years after Stalin's death.

The Lithuanian government, that part which deals with the arts, saw that I had been favorably received by Moscow, from *Pravda* to *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. So they figured it was okay for them to permit me not only to visit my mother, but, as it turned out, to publish my collected poems. Until then I did not exist for them, officially, that is. Actually, they had mocked me in some articles in the official party paper. They had presented me as an example of a sick and corrupt mind, printing some paragraphs from my writings with words omitted, sentences turned around. That was around 1965. But once Moscow became favorable to me, Lithuania immediately followed suit. Suddenly I could film whatever I wanted. Usually visitors are not permitted to go into the villages; they stay around their hotels. I was offered an official film crew to do whatever I wanted, but I said, "I will be using my Bolex; I don't want any film crews." They found it strange, but they gave in. They had their own crews around much of the time, making their own film about me and my mother—in Cinemascope. They sent me a print, which I have.

I also shot some Moscow footage on that trip, but I haven't used it so far.

MacDonald: When you came to Utica in 1974 or 1975 to show *Reminiscences*, a woman of Lithuanian background came to the film and seemed very upset about it.

Mekas: In general, the attitude among the older generation of immigrants is that if you go to visit one of those countries, you are a member of the communist party, or at best you are a spiritual communist, you are betraying the cause of those who are fighting for the liberation of Baltic countries. The younger generation, however, go for cultural exchange, on the assumption that the only way to help Lithuania is to go there and inform the people. Otherwise they

know nothing, they live in controlled ignorance. So you send books, whatever you can, and when something you send gets there — which is a miracle — somebody sees it and something happens. The older generation of immigrants is for a complete cut-off, which doesn't help either side.

MacDonald: In *Reminiscences* Lithuania under Soviet domination seems relatively comfortable. There are a couple of instances where your brothers joke about what Americans will think; their mood seems to be, "We're doing pretty well; things are okay."

Mekas: Yes. Lithuania is an agricultural republic which produces a lot of food for the rest of the Soviet Union. So it's in a privileged position. To a degree, that is. As long as we do not confuse food with liberty. . . . There, they do not confuse the two. They eat, but they also want liberty. Only Moscow and Washington confuse bread and economic prosperity with liberty.

When the Soviet film representative here in New York insisted on seeing the film, I showed it to him; he hit the ceiling. "How do you dare to make and show a film like this to the world! Why didn't you show the factories? Why didn't you show the progress?" I said, "In this film I'm interested only in my mother and my childhood memories, that's all. This is my past." But he couldn't understand it. He thought it was outrageous and an insult. Even a bottle of vodka didn't improve his mood. The star of *Solaris*, Donatas Banionis, saw the film with him and he thought it was great. The two of them almost got into a fist fight over the film. Only another bottle of vodka and a few songs calmed things down.

MacDonald: Did you have a time restriction? How long were you allowed to stay in Lithuania?

Mekas: There was no limit. I could stay as long as I wanted. They said, "Why don't you stay here forever?" And so did my mother; she was already looking for a wife for me there. But I had to come back.

MacDonald: At one point during the second half of the film, you say, "the morning of the fourth day." It comes as a shock because it seems as if we've been there a very long time. By the way, an intertitle at the beginning promises "100 GLIMPSES OF LITHUANIA." Why do you stop after the ninety-first section?

Mekas: Only ninety-one? I thought I went up to ninety-four or ninety-six. Anyway, I decided to take pity on the audience, to give them only ninety-one. On the other hand, what is "100"? It's just an idea; the film shows 100 glimpses in a loose sense.

MacDonald: There's also one missing, No. 71.



Elzbieta Mekas in Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania.

Mekas: I did not like that segment. I cut it out, never replaced it with other footage, and never corrected the number. Too much work involved. I figured most people wouldn't notice. Maybe eventually I'll put something there.

MacDonald: The time structure of that film is very complex. The first part opens with the end of your period of uprootedness. Then it goes back to the earliest part of your American experience. In the second part a similar thing happens: by visiting Lithuania, you're simultaneously moving forward in terms of your personal development, and going back to the time, or at least the place, where you were before the 1950 material. In the third part your life with your American cultural family — Ken and Flo Jacobs, Annette Michelson — continues, and you visit Kremsmuenster, a centuries-old center for the maintenance of culture.

Mekas: That developed organically. It's not that I sat and thought about time or about the past. I went directly to Austria from Lithuania; that's the way the footage was shot also. Originally I thought I would just use the Lithuanian material, but as I thought more about it, I liked the way the Austrian material complicated everything. Then I decided to complicate it further, give it more angles, more directions, by adding the Brooklyn section. Later I added some Hamburg footage. It just developed as I worked on it. Time became very integral, time and culture. Culture, as represented by Kubelka, Jacobs, Annette, Nitsch, had become my home. It was clear already at that time that there was no going back to Lithuania for me.

MacDonald: Your mother is really spectacular in that film.

Mekas: She's still in very good shape. She's ninety-six now.*

MacDonald: *Notes for Jerome* has a very different kind of organization than the other films. It's more involved with a specific place, Jerome Hill's environment in Cassis. Was that material made intermittently during this period?

Mekas: The whole film is about forty-five minutes long. Thirty-eight minutes or so are from the 1966 trip. There's also about three minutes from the trip the following year. Ten years later, in 1977, I made another visit. I used about two minutes of that footage.

MacDonald: There's a very different use of intertitles. Sometimes they're repeated and become motifs.

Mekas: They are not always descriptive. In all the other diary volumes most of the titles are used very factually to describe what will be coming up. In this film many of the titles are not descriptive. They make statements which are not connected with any image. I was experimenting with a different use of titles.

MacDonald: The sound is different too. There's no narration.

Mekas: There's very little of my voice, maybe because I did a lot of taping there and had enough other sounds.

MacDonald: Were you drawn to Cassis just because of the friendship with Jerome Hill?

Mekas: Jerome Hill had a little outdoor theater there on the shore of the Mediterranean. Usually he brought over some musicians, like the Julliard Quartet. But in 1966 he persuaded the city of Cassis to cosponsor—he sponsored part of it himself—the Living Theater's production of *Frankenstein*. A special theater was built outdoors for the performance. Jerome wanted somebody to record the event; I agreed to help him. I filmed *Frankenstein* and *The Mysteries*. They are still sitting in the cans. Some day I'll screen them—for the interest of theater students—I don't think they work as films. But as theater, *Frankenstein* was the greatest performance I have ever seen. Not the one that was brought to New York, but the one in Cassis.

* Elzbieta Mekas died on January 12, 1983, at the age of 97.



Jerome Hill in Notes for Jerome.

MacDonald: Was the *Cassis* section in *Walden* done at another time?

Mekas: That was done in 1966.

MacDonald: Is *Paradise Not Yet Lost* (1979) finished, or is it part of a larger film?

Mekas: I am not sure. I have been thinking of changing it. I may make it into a two-screen film.

MacDonald: Is the amount of material that you have for all the other years similar to what you had for *Paradise Not Yet Lost*? That's a pretty big film.

Mekas: I have as much material from every year. There is a whole *Cincinnati* film.

MacDonald: *Cincinnati*?

Mekas: Yes. I stayed there for a while. Also, I spent a lot of time around Jackie Kennedy's and Lee Radziwill's children. I have a lot of footage from that period.

MacDonald: How did that come about?

Mekas: After Kennedy's death Jackie went through some difficult years during which she was concerned about the children. She wanted to give them something to do, involve them with something. Peter Beard was tutoring them in

art history at the time. He suggested that I teach them some filmmaking. I got them simple cameras and made up some basic exercises, which they had great fun executing. It proved to be just the thing they needed. Caroline has since turned to photography and cinema, as you may know. John, by the way, when he was still in school, made some very exciting four-screen 8mm films—actually, one of the most exciting four-screen films I've ever seen—almost as good as Harry Smith's.

MacDonald: Are you to the point where the footage feels like a weight you carry, or is getting back to it something you look forward to?

Mekas: I really live only in my editing room. Or when I film. The rest of my life is slavery. But I am afraid that most of my early material—and my early films too—are fading, going. It would take about forty thousand dollars to preserve my films. That's a lot of money. Money—or dust. Money against the dust of time into which all our works eventually disappear.

On First Hearing about Hermeneutics

JOSEPH RYKWERT

*Sounds a bit silly till you come to look into it
well.*

—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Hermeneutics is a very old method—or discipline. Only recently, however, has it become a great worry to me, as some of my critics, as well as friends, have begun to attribute my interest in it, my penchant for it, or whatever skill I may have acquired through it, to the instructions which I received from my academic elders and betters. The truth, on the contrary, is that the very word *hermeneutics*, if spoken at all, was greeted with great disapproval in the various English-speaking academies which I attended. But anyone who had a more or less orthodox Jewish education, as I did in Warsaw before 1939, would not have required university instruction in this method; one absorbed it with mother's milk, or at father's knee, or uncle's—as in my case.

I record the song by which my uncle made me aware of this discipline not only because of an autobiographer's usual vanity, but also because it has seemed unknown to anyone to whom I have spoken of it (though I have not *sung* it, it is true; I cannot sing in tune and so do not try). Perhaps some reader of this account may complete my recollection of it.

To set the scene: we were *mithnagdim*. The word means “opponents” and was coined by the now fashionable *hassidim* for those Jews, whether orthodox or not, who rejected their views and practices. In my family the dietary laws and synagogal obligations were observed (at any rate partially) according to the Talmudic and later traditions which had been simplified and digested by the great Joseph Caro in the sixteenth century. But we were also westernizers. Silk hat and square-cut frock-coat was what my grandfather wore to the synagogue. An enlightened Polish nationalism as well as a firm attachment to national Jewishness (in the form of Zionism) were a dual family ideology.

My uncle, who was my father's senior, had antiquarian inclinations and

was the custodian of family lore. We had returned to the grandparental house one afternoon after watching a group of *hassidim* dance their rather wild round dance in a synagogue courtyard on the feast of the Joy of the Torah, when the year-long reading of the Pentateuch from the venerated parchment scrolls is finished and the scrolls are ceremonially wound back to the beginning. The dance was not as polished as the one in *Fiddler on the Roof*, but to a westernized schoolboy in his uniform of navy-blue worsted plus-fours and norfolk jacket it seemed archaic and primitive—in the derogatory sense—yet exciting because strange while not altogether alien.

Uncle Max thought it sensible to caution me against that excitement. His caution took the form of a song about a *yeshiva*, a Talmud school in a small village, where a Rabbi sits over his books with a single disciple, his *yeshiva-bocher*. There is a knock on the door; the disciple goes to open it and finds a peasant boy on the doorstep, whose upright stance and healthy looks contrast with the disciple's papery pallor and matted locks. The farmer's lad says: "*Czy tut krawiec mieszka?*" which in the plain translation would be "Does the tailor live here?" The disciple is so astonished by the alien's appearance (he had never seen a *goy* before) and by his mysterious utterance that instead of answering him he returns to the Rabbi.

"*Oi Rebbenyu,*" he interrupts.

"*Vus is mein kind?*" asks the distracted Rabbi. The disciple recounts his vision and wonders whether he had been granted an angelic visitation. The Rabbi asks the disciple to tell him what the vision said. The first thing he said, reports the disciple, was *Czy*, which is the Polish interrogative particle "if," or "whether."

"*Oi czy,*" the Rabbi meditates, "*oi czy das is a heiliges vort . . .*" The utterance could only be digested as text. *Czy* he decides means *tsadik yod alef*, three letters of the Hebrew alphabet which make the number 111. The Torah, he remembers, is better learned 111 times than 110 as the Talmud teaches. This making of words into numbers was called *Gematria*. *Czy* is clearly a holy word. Rabbi and disciple together sing the refrain: "*A malach, a malach is dos gewesen, dos is gewesen a malach!*"

The second word, *tut*, "here," seems equally pregnant: it is the prayer shawl, *talles* and the philacteries, *t'fillin*. The Torah must be read 111 times and it must be read in prayer shawl and philacteries. It is another holy word, and the messenger an angel. After the *Gematria* and the simple initials, a complicated acronym. According to the Rabbi the word *Krawiec*, which in plain Polish means "tailor" is the acronym of the Hebrew phrase from Psalm 118 "*Kol RinA V'IEshua b'ohaley TSadikim*" (it looks more convincing in Hebrew letters): "The voice of rejoicing and salvation in the tents of the just." Now the Torah, which must be read 111 times in prayer shawl and philacteries, is always read in the tents of the just. The angelic message is becoming clearer.

But at the end there was a difficulty: the word *mieszka*. The Rabbi cannot at first fit the word to the message. Finally he sees it: the text must be corrected:

for *mieszka* (does he live?) read *mashke*, "he sings," and it is all quite clear. *Mashke* is the yiddish for vodka. The accusation of drunkenness is the one most commonly made against the *hassidim* by the more commonplacely pious. Vodka then may be drunk as you study the Torah 111 times; it may be drunk in prayer shawl and phylacteries; it is most certainly drunk in the tents of the just. The message, the final chorus reiterates, certainly comes from an angel.

This is the joke's punchline. The *hassidim* were absurdly credulous, they looked for angelic messages everywhere and could torture the simplest goyish question into a coded revelation. And these revelations too often were simply justifications of their outrageous practices. I laughed with my uncle at his joke about the extravagant, poor, credulous, dirty, drunken *hassidim*. But not quite comfortably. Compared with my uncle's and my father's matter-of-fact piety and rationalized sifting of sacred laws, the hassidic transports seemed vital and entrancing. Of course, the peasant lad had come to the *Yeshiva* looking for a tailor to patch his breeches or whatever—and yet . . .

A wager was possible. One could make the assumption that the peasant was an angel and his message a new revelation, because every utterance, from child or crone, from stranger or familiar could contain a coded revelation; text could flower into gesture and excess. That thought turned the joke on my uncle: I was really on the side of the drunken Rabbi. The whole world may well be a succession of theophanies, if one only knew how to look for them. Maybe the Rabbi really did know what the farm-boy had come for, but found his disciple's suggestion more interesting; because what he really wanted to know was how he could exploit the simple utterance for his own purpose, pull the alien and obtuse words into his own orbit.

If the truth really were just an *adequatio intellectu ad rem*, then my uncle would have been right. But according to another understanding, which I could only intuit vaguely, it was the Rabbi who came nearer the truth. With that glimmer I began my search for hermeneutics.

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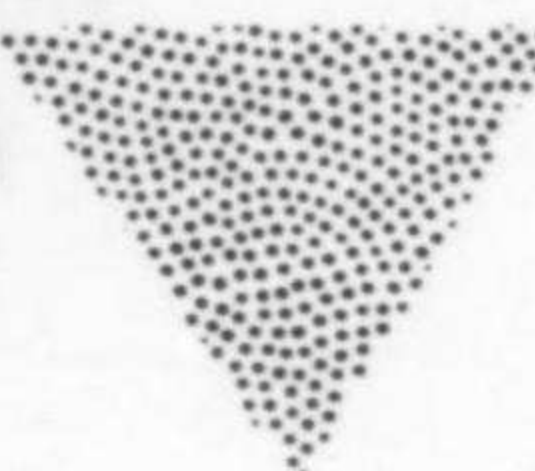
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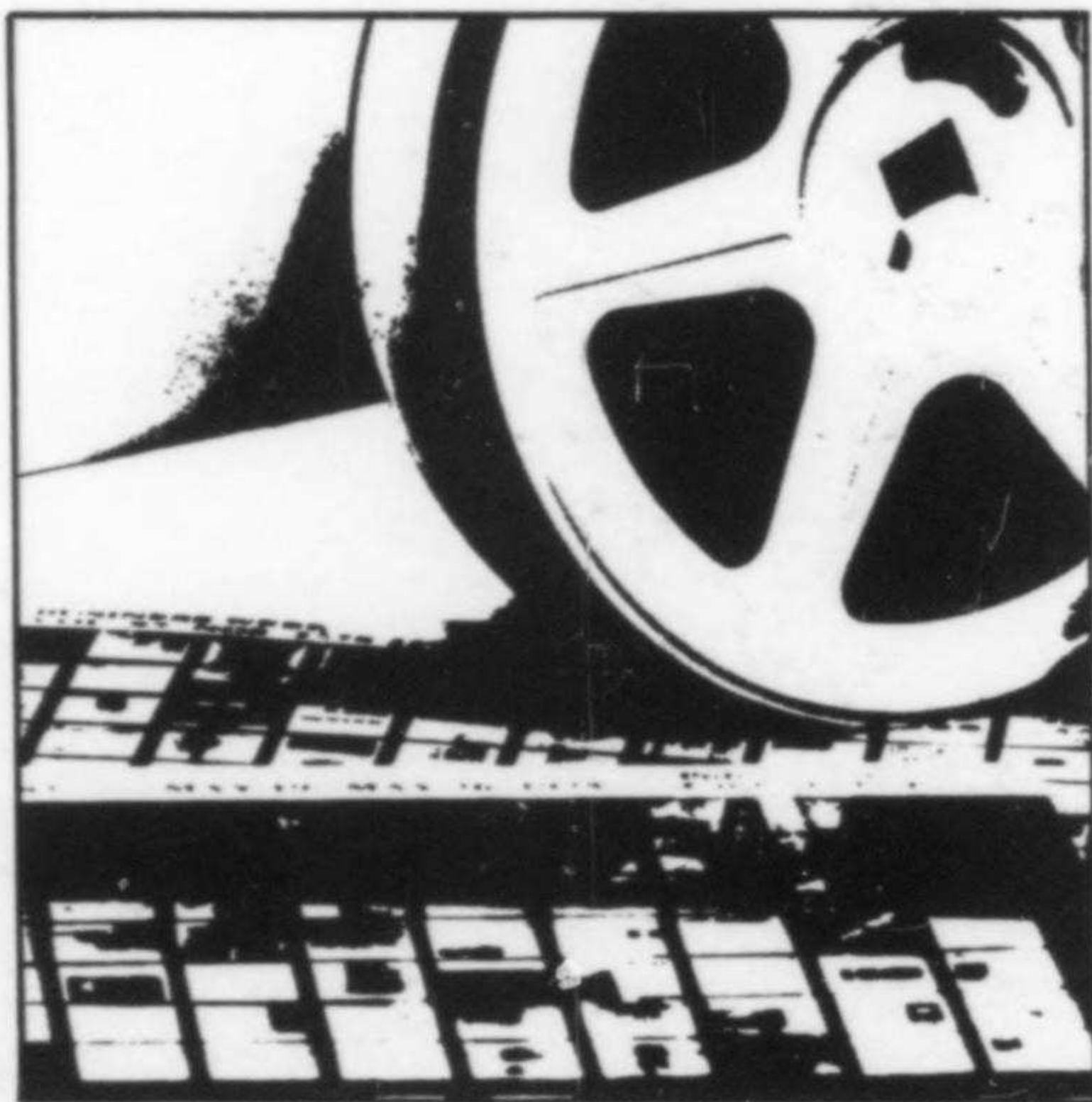


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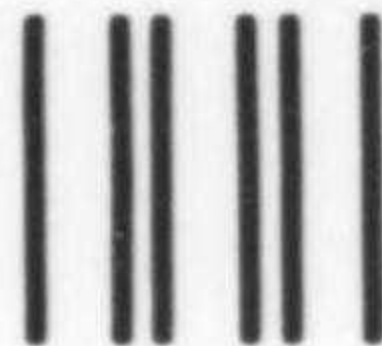
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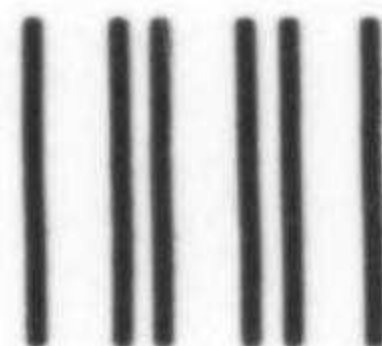
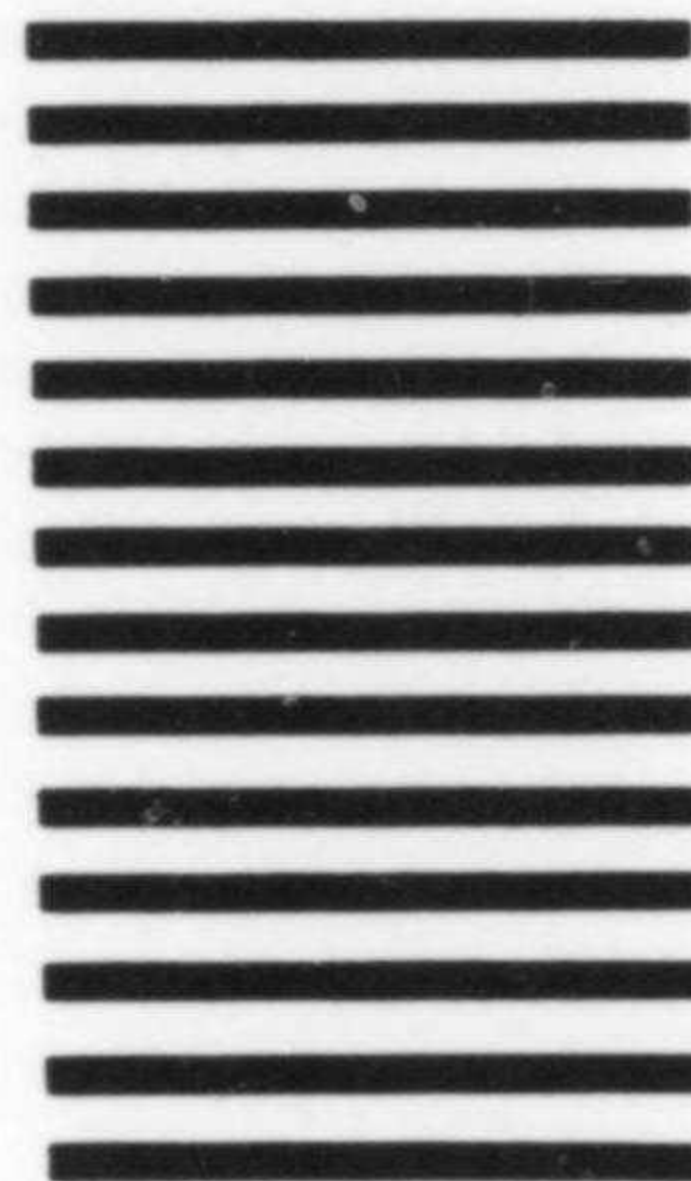
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