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Essay: Sky Scrapers

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ART MARK STEVENS Sky Scrapers

Brancusi gave wing to the spirit and form to the sacred;

Chinese artist Niu Bo defies the law of gravitas.

Brancusi's *Bird in Space* (1924). In red bronze.

BRANCUSI'S ART IS AS ELUSIVE AS ONE OF HIS "bird" sculptures, which seem about to slip into the sky with a turn of the wing. If you call his work modern, pure, or primitive, you must also call it archaic, complex, and sophisticated. Great artists, of course, often resist classification: The clerks of criticism struggle with Brancusi because his eagle does not fit their pigeonhole. But Brancusi is also difficult to place because he depends upon paradoxes to render a sensation that, for modern Western culture, must always remain profoundly, definitively elusive—the ancient sensation of the sacred.

In "Constantin Brancusi," at the Philadelphia Museum of Art—a major show of more than 100 works that is not coming to New York—the exhibition's organizers, Margit Rowell and Ann Temkin, usefully complicate and enrich Brancusi's art in various ways. They suggest, for example, that his differences with modernist (particularly minimalist) sculpture are no less important than his similarities. Like the Mondrian show in New York, their exhibition offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to witness the almost prophetic elaboration—the kind of endless spiraling toward a center—of a few obsessively rendered motifs. But this show, too, cannot quite "place" Brancusi. Perhaps no show could.

Born and raised in a Romania that was still largely preindustrial, Brancusi (1876–1957) never abandoned an animistic feeling for the sacred power of stone, wood, and the sort of deep sexual energy that gives rise to the soul. He moved to Paris in 1904; he worked briefly with Rodin. No one lives in Paris and wins over its most significant artists, as Brancusi did, without also becoming fluent in the fashionable ideas of the time. Not the least of his paradoxes, in fact, is that he learned a great deal about "the primitive" and "the Oriental" from the French: Brancusi traveled imaginatively to Africa and Asia by way of Paris, in order to reach, in a modern way, the Romania of his birth.

In the rendering of his mature themes—such as the "endless column," the "birds," the ovoids that could be a head, an egg, or a bottle—Brancusi did not sentimentally reconcile what could not be entirely reconciled, such as ancient and modern, earth and spirit, male and female. Nothing in Brancusi was compromised. Instead, he created sculpture in which such contradictory elements could live together. In

Brancusi, stone never stops being stone, but it can speak the language of light. There is always enough air around his forms. He once said, "Simplicity is complexity resolved." *Resolved*—not abandoned, modified, or reduced.

For example, Brancusi's bird sculptures, which he said represent "the joy of the soul liberated from matter," would appear to be simplicity itself. But the eye cannot quite fix or possess this elusive form: It is simply too complex. He used several different materials, each conveying a different sensation. In yellow marble, the bird has a glowing, internal luminescence. It is cooler in white or blue-gray marble—a bird melting into an overcast sky. The polished bronzes are a flash of wing in reflected sunlight. Each bird has about it something recognizably realistic, while also suggesting the abstract essence of all birds.

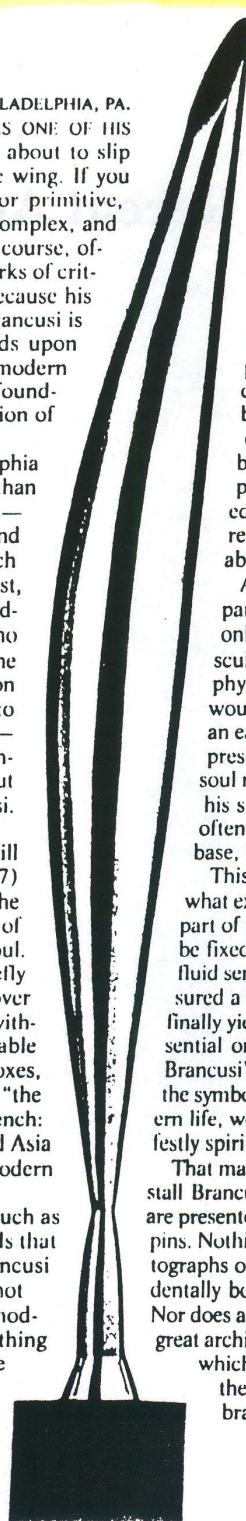
At the moment, the matter of Brancusi's bases particularly fascinates contemporary critics. Not only are the bases a key formal element in many sculptures, but they also have important metaphysical implications. For example, Brancusi would rest a mirrored or evanescent form upon an earthy wood or stone base, creating a vivid impression of the spirit springing from matter or the soul rising from the flesh. From his photographs of his studio, we know that Brancusi himself would often move the same work around from base to base, relishing the rub of difference.

This makes the contemporary mind uneasy. To what extent is the base art? Should it be a permanent part of this or that sculpture? Shouldn't art, in short, be fixed? Brancusi did not think that way. He had a fluid sensibility, one more Indian than Greek; he treasured a living variety, mutation, and elaboration that finally yield (as in the center of a Hindu temple) an essential oneness. It is telling that we are troubled by Brancusi's bases, for the base of a sculpture also marks the symbolic intersection between life and art. In Western life, we don't know how to "place" an art of manifestly spiritual ambition.

That may explain why there is no adequate way to install Brancusi's work in a museum. Usually the works are presented in precious little groups, like butterflies on pins. Nothing ever looks as vital as Brancusi's own photographs of his studio, where the art appears transcendently born among the truthful clutter of the world. Nor does anything in a museum ever look as right as his great architectural monument at Tirgu-Jiu, in Romania, which commemorates those who died defending the town in World War I. His art deserves the bracing air of the earth or the workshop.

Photograph courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

NEW YORK NOVEMBER 6, 1995



Photo

The Philadelphia Museum has suggested Brancusi's architectural power by using a chapel-like room to create an approximation of his never built *Temple of Meditation*, which he had hoped to create for the maharaja of Indore in 1938. It includes three birds and a stern wooden guardian called King of Kings (Spirit of the Buddha). The show's installation, which has won wide critical praise, has the frank look of a warehouse. An endless column rises toward a honeycomb grid of ceiling. The works are presented on platforms the color of cardboard; the seams show crudely on these platforms. It makes sense to provide a place that suggests work, so that the art does not become too precious or the setting compete with the perfected look of the sculpture. And I liked the natural light and intelligent arrangement of spaces. But this installation also provides a disappointing place for Brancusi. He is sensual and he is spiritual. The materials here are too sterile and industrial in appearance for an artist of this kind, especially one for whom the hand was so important. As usual, Brancusi seems elsewhere.

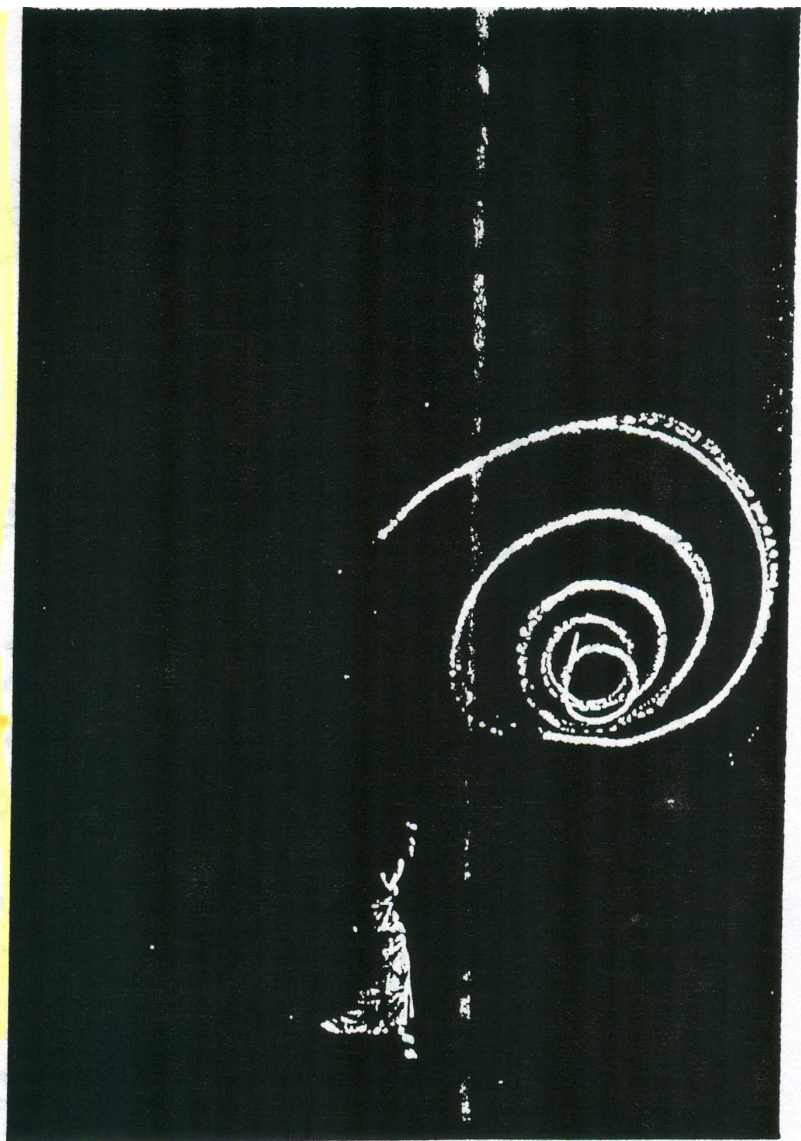
IN TOTALITARIAN CULTURES—IF NOT IN THE WESTERN art world—freedom remains a profoundly intoxicating idea. In 1985, the Chinese artist **Niu Bo**, then 25 years old, doctored a 1967 photograph of Red Guards celebrating the visage of Mao in Tiananmen Square. In Mao's place, he put an image of himself as a boy during the Cultural Revolution. He also suggested that, every day, another person should be so honored in Tiananmen Square. For this work, the Chinese authorities imprisoned him for almost a year.

In jail, Niu Bo often dreamed of the sky. Since his release, he has carried out a whimsical assault on boundaries and limits of every kind—physical, political, spiritual. He makes particular use of the conventions of conceptual art to challenge authority, much as contemporary Russian and Eastern European artists do when they employ conceptual and Pop devices to subvert totalitarian imagery. What distinguishes Niu Bo, however, is that he also draws upon key Asian traditions—in particular, Tibetan Buddhism.

As a result, his work, some of which is now on display at the Z Gallery in SoHo, has a different tone from much art produced under totalitarian regimes. Niu Bo has a Buddhist's disdain for—and often a Buddhist's laughter at—our narcissistic love of the body, our devotion to the merely material, our reverence for grandiloquent symbols. Death in his work is a great liberator. In the interests of the spiritual, he gently chides anything too pious or full of importance. In one work, he drops a parachute "hat" on Mount Fuji. In another, he uses mirrors to suggest a way of liberating Duchamp's proletarian urinal—now, sadly and paradoxically, an icon of iconoclasm—so that it may once again become just a utilitarian object.

Niu Bo's most dramatic art—if something that dies in your eyes soon after you see it can be called dramatic—is "sky painting." Here he uses a plane as his pencil. These works suggest many things for him, in addition to Chinese calligraphy: his longing for the sky while he was in jail; his dislike of the body's gravity; his childhood, when kids used chalk and boards because paper was too expensive; the Tibetan belief that the souls of saints become smoke and cloud shapes as they leave the body.

Photograph by Niu Bo/courtesy of Z Gallery.



Sky painting also appeals to him because as soon as it is painted it liberates itself from art by disappearing.

For *Tower of Babylon*, Niu Bo hired a plane trailing smoke to draw some lines—such as a spiral—in the sky above the Statue of Liberty. A thoughtful gesture. Although she is the greatest lady in New York, even the Statue of Liberty must sometimes dream of playing hooky, of loosening up, of being more free. Here, for a moment, she can drop that important Greek gravitas, releasing a spiral doodle of liberation from her heavy lamp, and then go back to holding up the light to the world. What a seduction! She will never forget Niu Bo, although she must return to her abstract husband.

Like any Buddhist pursuing the way, Niu Bo may sometimes fail to let go of that self that takes pride in having let go of the self. But he surely knows that. Someday, Niu Bo would like to chalk the hammer and sickle in the air over Tiananmen Square. Old party members would weep, he thinks, to see their ideal emblazoned across the sky. Those who suffered under Communism would cheer as the despised symbol decayed in the blue empyrean. Niu Bo hopes NASA will eventually help him project an image into space. This would be seen for a few days in the night sky and would, he believes, lift the spirits of children. ■

For *Tower of Babylon*, Niu Bo hired a plane to "draw" spirals in sky above the Statue of Liberty