

Seeing Brancusi's First Cry, A First Time, Again

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ABSTRACT

Constantin Brancusi's sculpture *The First Cry* (c. 1914; cast 1917)¹ asks questions that overlap with the concerns of contemporary existential phenomenology, namely, temporality, the relation between art and truth, the nature of embodiment, and the lived experience of perception. In this paper, I put Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's writings into dialogue with one of Brancusi's many ovoid sculptures. Even though Heidegger is not commonly included by those involved in body studies, his writings—especially the later writings—sketch out a philosophy that is at least open to the materiality and physicality of artworks and beholders. We will move through several entrances into this moving work: the work's shining, listening, mirroring, and temporal dimensions. The phenomenological method employed follows Heidegger's fundamental claim that art opens up entrances to the truth of the world around it.

Brancusi's work allows us to experience Merleau-Ponty's concept of the chiasm, Heidegger's idea of the fourfold, and reveals the ways in which philosophy needs art.

When we stay with *First Cry* in our philosophizing and in the gallery, we experience the motion and movement within Brancusi's work; the experience is at once essential and sensuous.

¹ <http://stg.ago.ca/collection/object/81/142>, c.1914; cast 1917.

Keywords:
Martin Heidegger;
Maurice Merleau-Ponty;
Constantin Brancusi;
Lived body;
Temporality;
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¹ See last page of the essay for photo reference.

In this paper, I engage in an embodied phenomenology of a singular artwork: Constantin Brancusi's (1876-1957) *First Cry*. Heidegger's (1889-1976) ontological questioning of individual artworks yields a philosophical experience of art that respects the hermeneutic circle's workings. The back and forth movement from individual artwork to more general phenomenological truths is accomplished by attending to particulars first while keeping a general set of philosophical questions in mind. Here, the general philosophical questions concern Heidegger's key concept of the fourfold and Merleau-Ponty's (1908-1961) insights about how we see artworks as embodied beings. A single artwork discloses concrete ideas and concepts through the lines, breaths, silences, absences, and rhythms of the work. *First Cry* brings us towards the rhythms of essential times: birth and death. The artwork allows us to experience the flow and sinuosity of lived time. Even though Heidegger is not commonly included by those involved in body studies, his writings—especially the later writings—sketch out a philosophy that is at least open to the materiality and physicality of artworks and beholders.¹

Gallery Prologue

At times when I stood before this elongated oval bronze sculpture and experienced the life that reached out through a glass encasement erected by human hands, my own hands long to hold

this figure, this shape, this bronzeness that rests before me. I am then drawn into the gallery's surroundings. I sense that I have entered somewhere-else than the somewhere of my usual being-in-the-world. I have come here to see something, some works, some art-works at work. How do I see here? Artificial lights gaze at the work, illuminating their own electric force that radiates into the bronze surface below. The work catches these light beams, absorbs them into its bronze flesh, and reflects these lights into the gallery's space. I look and try to see the work. My trying, this struggling teaches me to see my own looking as looking. I see these artificial sources of light as sources, but not as the origin of light. The work soaks in these shining lights; swirls of light appear on the surface of the bronze work. These swirls were not put there by Brancusi, yet they now become part of the work that displays itself at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO).

Bright swirls in the work invite participants to move closer and stay with the work. Staying with the work invites observers to move an arm to shield the work from the museum lights. Beneath these artificial lightings, artificial shinings, there is a multiply-layered light that dances like sunlight dances across an ocean's foam, a sun-filled radiance that fills the work with fluidity and movement. The work shines forth and radiates, not with a particular color or even a multiplicity of colors.

We know the work is made of polished bronze, yet it is not only bronze that shines forth. In this work, shining itself shines forth and allows us to experience it as shining. This experience of shining moves us away from asking what is in the museum's space and what is in the work's world as if these are separable. Overhead lights create immense swirls of light that then pass over into this shining we are beginning to understand. Merleau-Ponty says, "There is no choice to be made between the world and art or between "our sense" and absolute painting, for they pass into one another."²

Merleau-Ponty: Seeing and Shining

We are given the piece as offered now in this museum space—a gentle gathering of Brancusi's outpouring along with the piece as it has been preserved by the Art Gallery of Ontario and beholders. These are separable-yet-never-entirely separate. Somehow they radiate towards each other as lightening approaches a star-filled night. Merleau-Ponty's fundamental concept of the chiasm helps sketch out this relationship more fully: every relation is simultaneous holding and being held. The hold is held; it is inscribed and inspired in the same being that it holds.³ Mallin unpacks the term chiasm even further, telling us that the members of a chiasm are related "sinuously or flexuously by means of bending themselves to each other."⁴ External lights and the work join each other internally.

¹ <http://stg.ago.ca/collection/object/81/142>, c.1914; cast 1917.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," 48. Signs (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 39-83.

³ See Samuel Mallin. *Art Line Thought* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 243.

⁴ Ibid.

They move towards and away from the other. Our usual way of understanding relations—logically or causally—melts away into the richer phenomenological understanding of how things, people, concepts, and events relate when we are able to look beneath everyday surfaces and everyday ways of calculating.

First Cry discloses its shining as shining. Shining here brings something forth in its essence and yet the work's particularity is not transcended. The work comes forth as a work through its active shining, which is never a mere surface glistening. Active shining propels the viewer around the glass encasement so we can see the shining at work on the artwork. The viewer can then go to work on the work, enter its shining world, and circle the space of the artwork. This circling movement brings us towards the work's roundedness. Shining now stands forth in its essence as shining itself. This continuous shining shows that the work has set itself to work, internally lighting itself and its essence. The essentiality revealed is not static. Heidegger confirms this relationship between a work's activity, its essence, and shining: When the work sets itself to work the Being of the being comes into the steadiness of its shining.⁵ Shiny objects disperse shininess throughout the space they inhabit like a mirror—highly polished metal—and disclose one's image. Here though the view is also held by the work. Our looking is also held beneath the work's surface. The work holds us as we hold the work. This reciprocal seeing and being seen, being observer and observed, opens me even more to the experience of seeing. I have entered this work where things shine not only by lighting up a bright path in front of me, but also by gathering back this brightness into itself. Gathering does not happen during one moment; instead, the work and the spectator relate chiasmically to one another continuously. This intermediary space between my looking and the work does not shine forth itself.

Merleau-Ponty's writings affirm this description of how we see: "I can therefore see an object in so far as objects

form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects and as guarantee of the permanence of those aspects."⁶ My distance from the work reveals itself through this union of shining with holding. I see the hiddenness in the work as hiddenness only by dwelling, looking, and seeing the work with my entire being. That is, when I stop viewing the work as a commodity or object, I can experience the work as at once separate and part of my viewing. This intermediary space is more primordial than my looking or even the artwork. Meaning arises when we attend to our living relationship with the work. My lived body releases itself as I see myself seeing. I must leave enough distance for empty spaces to come forth. *First Cry's* ways of inhabiting space and its lines have drawn me to these reflections on distance, space, nearness, and hiddenness. Staying away from the work while still drawing near opens the beholder to meanings that arise between subjects and objects, before human subjects and human history.

The Listening

Another way into the work is through this hiddenness I have been describing. The work's title *First Cry* invites the beholder to listen for this cry. We can move into this concept of the cry through the work's mouth. This open mouth curves irregularly at the bottom to reveal a mouth that lacks what we normally expect to find within a mouth: emptiness, hollowness, cavernousness. Here we discover a mouth this is filled with bronze, filled up with the work's materiality. *First Cry* oozes bronziness. If I look closely, I see an inner circle within the mouth and dark markings which are not shiny but rather deep and withholding. No sound penetrates this bronze space. This cry must be lodged within the work, ringing in a key the beholder cannot hear.

This restful piece carries me toward the movement the work shelters. As I listen alongside the work, I release myself from the assumption that speaking must be textually based. The work teaches that

speaking is not only about words spoken. Speaking is more like singing. When I hear singing, I do not listen to the words alone. I listen so that I can experience the singer's body come forth. Immediately, I feel my mouth and face release and open up. The artwork invites this opening gesture. This visual artwork speaks from within its silent lines and rhythms. I understand the work's cry without hearing an audible cry. Importantly, *First Cry* does not give us a representation of someone crying, nor can we reduce the artwork to a general representation of crying. Not only is the piece not merely a representation, the work's meaning does not subsume the work. Instead, the work calls forth a certain way of inhabiting the world where intermediary spaces can be heard. Meaning lives in the work through its presencing and absencing. Here, we do not even need to name this open space as a mouth. Instead, we can name this space an open region filled with bronze shining forth and receding into itself. The work shows this shining and receding through its deep, dark markings inscribed into its bronziness that shows forth as hidden.

The Eye

This open mouth beckons me to follow the sinuous line which moves from the top of the mouth and empties into another opening on the left part of the head. This opening wraps itself around the head, emptying out into itself in a never-ending movement of opening. This should be a joyous discovery for I have found an opening—a space which will allow the piece to see its surroundings. This eye empties itself into emptiness so even though I can see this eye, there is still something that stays away. This showing from within emptiness moves me towards the right side of the head. I long for a symmetrical form here, a duplicate opening on the right side to mirror the left. Sameness would provide security and reliability; it would provide a way of seeing the left eye. I cannot look at this one opening without yearning for another. What is given instead? Here, there

5 Martin Heidegger. "Origin of the Work of Art (OWA)." Trans., Albert Hofstadter. *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Perennial Library, 1975), 36.

6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans., Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 68.

is the materiality of polished bronze. The absence of eye makes bronziness stand out as bronziness. This invisibility within the work holds me for this is where I look to see my own looking. To see then is not only to look out with physical eyes. It is not merely sensory data hitting rods and cones. If this were the case, I would simply perceive nothing as the negation of a named something. Instead, this smooth bronze teaches me that seeing always includes the unseen. This absent eye allows other eyes in the gallery room to stand out as eyes. Other artworks now see me seeing them and meet my gaze. In turn, these other artworks' eyes show up the absent part of *First Cry*. Something calls the beholder to hold this roundedness and protect it.

The Earth

First Cry haunts its surrounding like a flower bulb haunts its place between earth and world. Absence here does not merely hang over the work, emptying it of meaning. Instead, it empties out into something else—a shadow beneath—that teaches how solitary heads can bring forth the fullness of our embodiment. Where there is shadow, there is body. *First Cry*, a piece that lacks what we normally expect from a body reveals itself as bodily in the shadows beneath its lines. These shadows bring us into the between-ness of earth and sky. Shadows need light in order for humans to see them, but they appear grounded on earth. When we look at the shadowy realm beneath this work, we notice that the piece reclines in order to display its shadowiness.

Ridges underneath the left part of the head jut forth. These ridges stand out from the rest of the head. These raised ridges call forth a tree's movements: veins pump bronze-blood mixed with darker flecks of blood that pulse throughout the bark. These thick interconnected

veins hold the piece and cradle it. *First Cry* is held by both shadow and earth. My initial urge to shelter the piece subsides some with this discovery of the world's self-holding. We will now describe this non-human self-holding.

This sheltering of bronze from the earth unveils a willingness to care for and maintain the world. Hidden earthiness maintains the work as work. This holding does not store the shining bronze within itself like a flash drive stores data in order to use it up later. This care-ful holding is like the cook who nurtures her ingredients and sets them in order. Heidegger tells us that the "work of the peasant (*Bauer*) does not challenge the soil of the field. In the sowing of the grain it places the seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase."⁷ Caring cultivation preserves the soil in a similar way as *First Cry's* ridges care for its bronzes. Earth and soil recall the sky that allows the soil to remain soil.

First Cry's earthy holding is the lining that sustains the work. It is, to use Merleau-Ponty's term, the flesh of the piece.⁸ This flesh cannot be detached from the lightning-bronze that breaks forth from these fleshy limbs. Hidden holding reveals the bronze flesh that pulsates through the work. The work's movement includes earthy hiding and moving flesh that pushes forward into the open, into the world. Brancusi's use of highly polished bronze in this piece and his many other bronze pieces, creates additional space, both inner space and what Arnold Berleant calls the "surrounding space" beyond the piece.⁹ Our embodied phenomenology reveals that Brancusi did not overcome and transcend motion; he did not turn sculpture into "a kind of Platonic surmounting of motion, a turning of sculpture into static, cerebral art."¹⁰ When we stay with this piece, we experience the motion and movement

within Brancusi's work; the experience is both essential and sensuous.

This cycling back motion allows the work to rest and recline into its earthy holding. The work retreats, bursts forth, stays away, hides, pulsates, rises, and falls. The work works by gathering these movements together from within itself. Here we can experience the meanings and truths Heidegger saw in the Greek temple: birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline.¹¹ The Greek temple revealed the meaning and values of its world. *First Cry* also sets up a world because it teaches about distance, closeness, fluidity, speaking, and silencing. *First Cry* rests within itself and melts away dichotomies that could be drawn between rest and motion. Here, repose includes motion. Earth and world chiasmically bend and bind to one another since "world and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated."¹² The work's world opens up an openness where the work can recline, move, draw near, and then retreat.

World and Earth

The worlding of world—world being itself and earth's holding—draws me both into myself and away from myself. Even though I perceive the piece holding itself, I still long to hold its shape and feel its shining in my hands. I am drawn into my own body and its earthiness. At the same time, the everyday living that allows me to go forth into the world pushes forth. This is the world revealing itself alongside the earth. The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts forth through world. This return to my body leads me to my situatedness as an embodied being. The world of this museum comes forth and shows forth the work's world that is also grounded in earth. The work's particular bronze materiality shows up the limits to

⁷ Martin Heidegger. "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans., William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977), 15.

⁸ Mallin (1996), 251.

⁹ Arnold Berleant. *Re-thinking Aesthetics, Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 145.

¹⁰ Morris Grossman. *Art and Morality: Essays in the Spirit of George Santayana*. Edited by Martin A. Coleman (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), Chapter 16.

¹¹ OWA, 42.

¹² OWA, 49.

which Brancusi responded.

World and earth's essential struggling with and against each other open the materiality to a primary sensing. *First Cry* produces its own light beneath the museum's simulated lights. Bronze radiates on its own and suggests an eternal shining. *First Cry's* fluidity, roundness, bronze fullness, and emptiness opens opposition into something more than a rift between two mutually exclusive terms. Chasm blends into chiasm. Although the work suggests infinity through its ovoid shape, it is an infinity that includes irregularities. The nose that looks straight is filled with ridges. The bottom of the mouth curves sinuously. Left and right blend into one another without symmetry. The work resembles a child, and then sometimes the work resembles someone close to death. However, the piece does not merely represent life and death; it is not a representation of life and death. We do not need to know whether the piece represents a child or older person. Extracting exact meaning from the work will not bring us closer to the work's meaning. Meaning resides within the work's hiddenness.

Earth and world struggle with each other, yet there is still unity in the work. The work's unity is still filled with irregular lines, non-symmetrical openings, curvaceous earthy holdings jutting forth, and a shape that is neither completely round nor completely oval. Brancusi responded to this unity of earth and world we now encounter. The artist made room for earth and world to come into their own. By allowing art and world to come into their own and presence, the work's workings take us to its origin. In this beginning, we find a silent realm that gathers together the elements Heidegger calls the fourfold.

The Fourfold and Mirroring

The care-ful gathering of these four elements unites in *First Cry*. The work's long ovoid shape and bronze reflexivity help us better understand Heidegger's discussion of the fourfold. Heidegger

shared that each one of the four mirrors in its own way the presence of the other. Earth reveals itself as earth in its own way only in the presence of the other three. This mirroring does not just display similitude which exists between four concepts. This mirroring does not portray a likeness.¹³ Mirroring is also chiasmic for worlding bronze holds my human image while showing itself to me. Earth juts forth from within the world, becoming part of the work's world while still remaining partially concealed. This unity brings forth a sacred element that we experience in the artwork's unifying and eternal dimensions.

The fouring of the four brings us to the work's createdness. It is only when the work's createdness is allowed to stand out from the work itself that the work can continue to exist. Heidegger's crucial question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" can be addressed by looking to this work's createdness. This invites us to think about the active communion among creator, work, beholders. Heidegger calls this the communion of "the artist and the process and the circumstances of the genesis of the work."¹⁴ Beholders let the work's createdness come into view. This may not happen if beholders fail to give the work enough time and attention. However, the work holds open this possibility and invites beholders into its space.

The Beautiful Present

When beholders experience the work's createdness, we are brought to a beginning, a beginning of truth, an advent of truth. For Heidegger, the beautiful belongs to the advent of truth.¹⁵ I am brought to the beginning of the world when this cry was first emitted, when it could be heard as a cry. The shape, form, materiality, shining, the setting up of a world, earth's worlding, bring me back to the past. The past lingers within this present setting, not only my present with this work, but present and past understood more generally. Brancusi's later ovoid

sculptures "Beginning of the World" and "Sculpture for the Blind" resonate with *First Cry's* worlding and earthing. These later pieces' titles are often interchanged which shows up the interconnectedness of the pieces. The two later pieces resemble eggs or cells even more prominently than *First Cry*. This reinforces the theme of birth present in all three works. The artist's future works reveal themselves now in our experience—this present gift—of *First Cry*. This work shows that past, present, and future are related. We witness their intertwining in this artwork. These three related temporal dimensions bend towards each other, recline with each other, constantly move within each other and bend away from one another. Even though Brancusi worked on "the same" piece over and over, the works never become repetitious or monotonous. He continuously searched for beginnings—the spaces before space—silences.¹⁶

13 OWA, 179.

14 OWA, 65.

15 OWA, 81.

16 I thank the *Janus Head* editors for their helpful suggestions, and thanks to members of the Heidegger Circle and Samuel Mallin for constructive feedback on earlier versions of this work.



Constantin Brancusi
The First Cry, c. 1914; cast 1917
brass
Overall: 19.5 × 24.5 × 16 cm, 25 lb. (7 11/16 × 9 5/8 × 6 5/16
in., 11.3 kg)
Art Gallery of Ontario
Purchased with assistance from the Volunteer Committee
Fund, 1981
81/142
Romanian, 1876 - 1957
Photo © Art Gallery of Ontario

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