

## **Medardo Rosso**

### **Inventing Modern Sculpture**

#### Thematic Organization of the Exhibition

In 1926, two years before his death, Rosso sketched out an exhibition format in which “the most esteemed works of the past are exhibited side by side with contemporary pieces and the art that is most discussed today.” In the spirit of an expanded retrospective, the exhibition picks up on this comparative principle, which Rosso also implemented, and shows his work for the first time in the broader context of artistic developments in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Juxtaposing Rosso’s work with selected pieces by fifty artists from the past 150 years that directly or indirectly resonate with it, the exhibition offers a new way of looking at the history of modern art through the oeuvre of an artist that Juan Muñoz once described as one of the “missing links of modernity.” Conversely, this offers scope for visitors to approach Rosso’s pioneering, yet simultaneously idiosyncratic and complex oeuvre, through a web of reciprocal relationships. In the subsequent section of the exhibition, these relationships are unfolded in the light of various thematic perspectives.

#### **Prozess and Performance**

From the early 1890s on, Medardo Rosso’s focus kept shifting increasingly from the finished artwork toward the design and production process itself—and toward the continuous work with the material and the event character of artistic practice. From 1900, Rosso began repeatedly creating performative self-stagings in his studio, in which he presented himself as a kind of “artist laborer” who, rather than tasking others with menial assignments, did everything himself. Rosso’s exploration of the question of process and performance already made evident what in the 1960s was termed the “performative turn,” during which procedures, activities, or events expanded and sometimes even replaced the traditional object-based concept of a work of art.

Artists in dialog with Medardo Rosso: Giovanni Anselmo, Anton Giulio Bragaglia, Edgar Degas, Loie Fuller, Senga Nengudi

#### **Anti-Monumentality**

Medardo Rosso’s ideal of an animate, mobile, boundary-expanding sculpture constituted a radical break with the prevalent European monumental tradition. His constant editing of previously introduced subjects and motifs, the intimate scale, and the tentative provisional nature of his sculptures run counter to the idea of a location-bound heroic monument that is here for all eternity, while confronting this notion with a “moment’s monument.” Rosso, who according to the Symbolist writer Jehan Rictus regarded himself as a “European anarchist,” combined his artistic approach with a rejection of the national state and a commitment to overcoming boundaries of all sorts. Playing a central role in this anti-monumental mindset were the soft, malleable materials of wax and plaster, “poor” materials that had hitherto been used in the artistic process in reproduction only. On the content level, Rosso also turned his attention to “unheroic” subjects, often depicting anonymous people. This made the social upheavals of modern urban society in the late nineteenth-century palpable. Artists in dialog with Medardo Rosso: Guillaume Apollinaire, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Luciano Fabro, Ellsworth Kelly, Richard Serra, Edward Steichen

## **Touching, Embracing, Shaping**

Two core subjects are revealed in the 1886 sculpture *Aetas Aurea*, which shows Rosso's wife Guiditta Pozzi and their not-quite one-year-old son Francesco. One is the direct treatment of the material, from which everything is created and to which everything will return; the other is the relationality of the figure and the surrounding space. On the one hand, the mother touches the baby's cheek in an affectionate (or perhaps possessive) gesture, which at once makes viewers think of the sculptural, formative touch of the material. On the other hand, mother and child are merged in an intimate embrace, which the sculpture presents like the embodiment of the kind of "holding environment" the psychoanalyst and pediatrician Donald Winnicott described as the physical and emotional quasi-fusion of mother and infant without which the child could not survive. What is already suggested in Rosso's sculpture—the reinterpretation of the Pygmalion myth, the male creator animating the female model in his studio with his tender touch—is given an ultimate reversal by sculptors like Phyllida Barlow or Alina Szapocznikow.

Artists in dialog with Medardo Rosso: Phyllida Barlow, Louise Bourgeois, Eugène Carrière, Käthe Kollwitz, Alina Szapocznikow

## **Repetition and Variation**

From the end of the 1890s, Medardo Rosso increasingly focused on repeating and varying his existing repertoire of about forty subjects, so much so that he created no new content from 1906 to his death in 1928. Rosso instead revisited his work groups in loop-like processes, creating and subsequently manipulating replicas, taking photographs and modifying the prints. The idea of a "finished" work made way for a potentially incompletable process. Rosso's aim was to make the once-captured moment of a reality perceived as contingent accessible over and over again. Despite resorting to reproduction technologies, Rosso also conceived his serial sculptures as individual works of art, thereby subverting the distinction between original and copy. Similar questions of production and reproduction, of seriality, original, and copy, became ubiquitous much later in contemporary art, especially in the Pop-Art movement of the 1960s, as well as with the postmodern-influenced appropriation practices of the Pictures Generation.

Artists in dialog with Medardo Rosso: Sherrie Levine, Andy Warhol, James Welling

## **Mise-en-scène**

The more autonomous the artwork became in Modernism, the more the relationship to its environment swung into the focus of artistic enterprise. Frame and base became important instruments in the new designation of position. Medardo Rosso found his very own solution for this. From 1904 on—earlier still in his studio—he presented his sculptures in glass display cases on wooden plinths, the so-called "gabbie" (Italian term for cages), which were custom-made to fit the respective pieces and formed a significant element of his proto-installative mise-en-scène. Beyond its practical protective function, the "gabbie" anchored the sculpture that had become "homeless" in the course of the Modernist movement, in its surrounding. Paradoxically, Rosso's cages are less about cutting his sculptures off from their

environment and more about including a piece of the surrounding, the lighting, and the air as an integral part of the work itself. In his photographs, Rosso experimented with the arrangement and “reframing” of his works through different perspectives, various selected image details, and collaged interventions.

Artists in dialog with Medardo Rosso: Francis Bacon, Alberto Giacometti, Robert Gober, Jasper Johns, Francesca Woodman

### **Appearance and Disappearance**

Medardo Rosso's sculptural concept fundamentally builds on the portrayal and capture of the moment of appearance and the eventful point in time. In his sculptures, ephemeral faces seem to appear, at times spectrally, from the unformed, seemingly undefined material. Even if Rosso in his sculptures tried to reinforce the claim to portraying the kind of fleeting moment of appearance and dematerialization through the use of flowing or translucent materials like wax as well as a meticulously staged presentation, it was only the light-based medium of photography that really opened up an opportunity to largely “suspend” the dialectics of materialization and dematerialization as it runs through his entire oeuvre, in the depiction of the ephemeral as a trace of light.

Artists in dialog with Medardo Rosso: Nairy Baghramian, Constantin Brâncuși, David Hammons, Matthijs Maris, Marisa Merz, Amedeo Modigliani, Georges Seurat, Erin Shirreff

### **Forms Undone**

As much as Medardo Rosso's interest was in dematerialization, his eccentric use of materials and processes also heralded a central paradigm shift in Modernism—from the idealistic primacy of the “beautiful” form that overcomes the material to the exploration of “base” materials, which manifests in a transgressive aesthetic of the amorphous. By arresting the production process on the level of the wax or plaster model, Rosso pulls transitions and preliminary states into sharp focus. In some works, the unformed material gets out of hand, producing a seemingly uncontrolled, “lawless” surplus that emancipates itself from the figurative portrayal and gives the work an uncanny liveliness. Conversely, it is precisely the medium of wax, which Rosso frequently used, that seems to entertain a vicinity of death and ephemerality because of its morbid, fleshy air as well as the fact that it was traditionally used to mold death masks. Queries of “fluidity” and “liquefaction,” as they present themselves in Rosso's oeuvre, later became an important jumping-off point, especially for women artist from the 1960s on, to address male-connoted fears of “becoming formless.”

Artists in dialog with Medardo Rosso: Olga Balema, Lynda Benglis, John Chamberlain, Isa Genzken, Eva Hesse, Hans Josephsohn, Yayoi Kusama, Maria Lassnig, Robert Morris, Juan Muñoz, Paul Thek, Rosemarie Trockel, Hannah Villiger, Rebecca Warren