



Florence Henri. Self-Portrait. 1928.

Florence Henri's Oblique*

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One day in Paris in 1928, Florence Henri arranged herself among things—a mirror, two reflective balls, a wooden table. She let her body settle, allowing gravity to take hold of her shoulders while she crossed her arms on the table and slackened her facial muscles into an impassive mien. Only then did she bid the camera's shutter to open its eye onto her arrangement, arresting an instant of elemental stillness. In its habitus of dispassion, the photograph reads as an iteration of the detached, rational, and objective aesthetic that characterized the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) of the 1920s or as an exemplar of the formalist experiments of the Bauhaus's *Neues Sehen* (New Vision), both of which were postwar aesthetic modes that combined de-cathexis with a pragmatic mastery of the empirical world. An assemblage of deliberation composed with a geometric vocabulary, the photograph documents phenomenological consciousness in the austere language of mathematical physics, rooted in logic and the empirical world: "I am, because this is." And though Henri's intentionality toward objects is exacting, it is also purposefully off-kilter. She has deliberately placed the two balls just right of the mirror's center, such that the linear fissure created by the table planks bisects only one ball while leaving the other compositionally unmoored, staging an inaccuracy that underlines the accuracy of the rest of the picture. The mirror that duplicates the balls equally eschews alignment, its edges slightly outside the diagonals that could, but do not, contain the mirror within them. This is an eccentric—literally, out of center—picture (*ekkentros*, from *ek*, "out of," and *kentron*, "center"); it is willfully out of line.

Placed at an oblique angle in order to facilitate a pictorial illusion, the camera stands behind and to the left of Henri, capturing her mirrored likeness but not the camera's reflection. Orthogonal lines that project into an illusionistic mirror-space appoint the individual as vanishing point, a nod to Renaissance perspective that nominates the modern subject at its center—unique, self-sufficient, and autonomous. Yet here, that autonomous subject is a phantasm. Rather than lay bare its technological apparatus, this modernist photograph is spectral and specu-

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lar, functioning as a self-conscious subversion of photographic transparency. Henri's hands are demonstratively not at work, not taking the picture. Instead, the photograph asserts that the specter in the mirror is not made by human hands; it is an *acheiropoieton*, an icon conjured miraculously.

Henri's 1928 self-portrait circulated widely as an icon of New Vision photography. Bound into a formalist discourse that corrals its reception and diminishes its peculiarity, the photograph functions as an emblem for a certain set of historical concerns tied to affective detachment, technological acuity, and specular play. The first to tether her work to a mechanical formalism was her friend László Moholy-Nagy, a key collaborator on the 1929 *Film und Foto* (FIFO) exhibition, which showcased the multifarious potential of modern photography. Organized by the German Werkbund (an association of artists, designers, architects, and industrialists), the Stuttgart exhibition was the first systematic overview of international developments in film and photography of the interwar years in which visual-technological experiment flourished. Moholy-Nagy included Henri's self-portrait along with another twenty of her still lifes—mostly objects with mirrors—as exemplars of a self-referential photographic practice that investigates the possibilities of abstract, optical composition with light.¹ They represent a *deliberate* process that eschews photography's mimetic, reproductive capacities for a productive, generative artwork that instantiates new relationships in the world. The stakes of those relationships, according to Moholy-Nagy's 1925 Bauhaus book *Painting, Photography, Film*, which became the conceptual template for the FIFO exhibition, is a broadly conceived "service to human development" anchored in a primordial "craving" for the new.² Far from the transformative cognition conceived by the Soviet avant-gardes, the fresh correlations imagined here serve a vague humanist agenda virtually destined for a capitalist advertising apparatus that feeds on that very cycle of yearning and novelty.³ Henri's self-portrait was subsequently reproduced in Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold's *Foto Auge*, published to accompany

1. A total of twenty-one Henri photographs were exhibited, an amount on a par with that of established avant-garde practitioners Man Ray and Germaine Krull and far exceeding that of most others represented. Christina Zelich, "Florence Henri's Photography within the Avant-Gardes," in *Florence Henri* (New York: Aperture, 2015), p. 13.

2. László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film* (London: Lund Humphries, 1969), p. 31. "It is a basic fact of the human condition that the functional apparatus craves for further new impressions every time a new exposure has taken place. This is one of the reasons why new creative experiments are an enduring necessity. *From this point of view the creations are valuable only when they produce new, previously unknown relationships.* This is another way of saying that reproduction (repetition of existing relationships) without enriching points of view... be considered at best only a matter of virtuosity. Since production (productive creativity) is primarily of service to human development, we must endeavor to expand the apparatus (means) which has so far been used solely for purposes of reproduction for productive purposes." I cite Moholy-Nagy as the sole author of the book for purposes of bibliographic convention, but recent research has highlighted the evidence that Lucia Moholy in all likelihood played a significant role in this project. See Robin Schuldenfrei, "Images in Exile: Lucia Moholy's Bauhaus Negatives and the Construction of the Bauhaus Legacy," *History of Photography*, 37, no. 2 (May 2013), pp. 182–203, and Lucia Moholy, *Marginalien zu Moholy-Nagy: dokumentarische Ungereimtheiten* (Krefeld: Scherpe Verlag, 1972).

3. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 82–107; and Rosalind Krauss, "Jump Over the Bauhaus," *October* 15 (Winter 1980), pp. 103–10.

the FIFO exhibit and foreground avant-garde practices. The portrait and its reception launched her international career as a photographer, a path upon which she had embarked only the previous year. As the comparison with El Lissitzky's *Composition* on the facing page of *Foto-Eye* makes clear, Henri's oblique self-portrait proclaims the human body a thing among things. Emblematic of the detachment that gave rise to the designation "new objectivity," neither of these bodies is engaged in labor; instead, they are elements within a rationalized composition, flesh abstracted.



*Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold. Foto-Eye.
(Stuttgart: F. Wedekind, 1929).*

If, as phenomenology asserts, intentionality represents a quality of consciousness towards the world, then which states of mind does this picture's obliquity materialize? Though arguably rooted in Henri's specific geographical dislocations and psychic displacements, the answer to the question, which I will map out below, unearths a fundamental loss of ground coupled with tenacious efforts to reclaim it. It also reveals the unconscious operations that underpin the self-portrait's resonance in a pictorial culture rife with affective repression. Reading Henri's photographic work obliquely, this essay sidelines the modernist aesthetic frame that contains readings of this work to look askance at the terrain of subject-object relations being rethought urgently by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, among others, at this historical juncture. Though its parameters were bitterly contested, phenomenology sought to redefine the conception of human relationality with the world, focusing on the qualities of individual human consciousness vis-à-vis phe-

nomena. At issue is not the *what* of the world (things) but the *how* of relating (what Husserl called *noesis*), rooted in “intentionality,” the term Husserl invoked to indicate that consciousness is directed toward things in the world.

Consciousness always has an object. The New Objectivity, after all, names a “new” sober or detached orientation to the world, shattered after war, with a *noesis* of dispassion, an internal quality that can range from nonchalance to repression. “New Vision,” coined in the same historical matrix by Moholy-Nagy, likewise signals a reformation of perception. Both terms name an ambition to establish a new ground of consciousness after World War I rooted in the altered apprehension of the phenomenal world.

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“If we desire a revaluation in the field of photography so that it can be used productively,” asserts Moholy-Nagy in *Painting, Photography, Film*, “we must exploit the light sensitivity of the photographic (silver bromide) plate: fixing upon it light phenomena (moments from light displays) *which we have ourselves composed* (with contrivances of mirrors or lenses, transparent crystals, liquids, etc.).”⁴ Exploit, fixing, *we ourselves composed*—agency takes on an urgency in this passage that foregrounds direct artistic mastery over natural phenomena. As Michael Jennings has noted, Moholy-Nagy was interested in the interpenetrations of the human subject and the camera.⁵ At the same time, the synthetic technology described in this passage is meant to bring human capacity to its limits.

Henri’s self-possessed, abstracted presence within a composition of mirrored surfaces that extend vision derives from photographic experiments she would have witnessed the previous year, during a four-month sojourn at the Dessau Bauhaus in 1927. Passing through to visit her friends Margarete Schall and Grete Willers, who were students there, Henri decided to enroll as an unmatriculated student for the summer semester from April to July 1927 and participate in the preliminary course taught by Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers.⁶ This was not the first time that she had enrolled as a Bauhaus student—in 1923–24 in Weimar she took classes in Henry van de Velde’s art nouveau structure—but it was her first experience on the new modernist campus designed by Walter Gropius that was intended to embody the institution’s industrial-technological ambitions. In Dessau, Henri moved into the Moholys’ Bauhaus Master house, having met László on a previous visit. She became close friends with Lucia and served as model for her close-up, abstracting

4. Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, p. 31. Emphasis in original.

5. Michael Jennings, “Agriculture, Industry, and the Birth of the Photo-Essay in the Late Weimar Republic,” *October* 93 (Summer 2000), p. 38.

6. Giovanni Battista Martini and Alberto Ronchetti, “Biography,” in *Florence Henri*, p. 194.

portraits, which in turn found an analogue in Henri's 1928 self-portrait.⁷ Though Henri produced primarily abstract Cubist paintings and collages at the time, she also experimented with photography and witnessed how Bauhaus teachers and students alike explored the formal possibilities of light-reflecting surfaces—mirrored, refracted, illuminated, shadowed, static, and fleeting.⁸ She participated in those experiments, a subject among objects.

Bauhaus explorations with light and contrivances, though often ludic, magnified the disclosive potential of reflection and reveled in uncanny effects that subordinate human agency. Prized for their panoptic view, mirrored balls in Bauhaus photographs reflected the surrounding room space in distorted, haptic detail, extending the beholder's vision and connecting our consciousness with the object world behind us. As such, mirrored balls represented the prosthetic supplements to human vision that Moholy-Nagy celebrated. The example of convex perspective reproduced in *Painting, Photography, Film* operates simultaneously as a fun-house self-portrait, a tactile amplification of Bauhaus weaving work, and an architectural room study.⁹ In contrast to the selectivity of human sight, such photographic-specular vision renders each element in synchronous focus, issuing a seamless spatial-tactile montage of interior space in which the particularity of floor patterning before us cohabits with the distant ceiling and windows behind us in a single, grounded, pictorial field impossible to conjure with the ordinary camera. Joost Schmidt's 1931 ads for Bauhaus wallpaper use convex mirrors to conflate space and time,



*Florence Henri with Georg Muche
at the Dessau Bauhaus, 1927.*

7. Zelich, "Florence Henri's Photography," pp. 8–9.

8. Ibid., p. 8.

9. This image was also replicated fourfold for the FIFO brochure designed by Moholy-Nagy.



Georg Muche, "Photographed Reflections in a Convex Mirror," from László Moholy-Nagy, Painting, Photography, Film, 1925.

conjuring both a distorted interior and a vision of the future in a glass ball. Henri may also have witnessed how Lucia Moholy sought to *avoid* any inadvertent reflections of the photo apparatus and room in her documentary photographs of metal workshop products, whose surfaces gleam with a modernist machine aesthetic.

After her stimulating summer in Dessau, one that would ultimately reorient her life's course, Henri returned to Paris in August 1927 with new artistic ideas and a shipment of Bauhaus furniture that would subsequently make repeated appearances in her photographs, co-conspirators in her compositions of flesh and metal. Her purchases included Wilhelm Wagenfeld's glass lamp and teapot



Joost Schmidt. Advertising brochure for Bauhaus wallpaper. 1931.

as well as Marcel Breuer's chromium-plated steel armchairs and tables.¹⁰ Henri's Parisian private sphere was thus attuned to the new Bauhaus aesthetics of technological modernity.¹¹ The Bauhaus and its modern conveniences, she wrote to Schall, had spoiled Paris for her.¹²

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The studied displacements in Henri's self-portrait—the balls off-center, the mirror off-kilter—can be read as deliberately formalist, an echo or repetition of the displacement enacted by the oblique picture itself. Frame and subject matter reinforce one another, as the whole picture, from content to construction, is just slightly off to one side in a display of pictorial artifice and artistic volition. Neither perpendicular nor parallel to a given surface, “oblique” refers to a slanting angle. Formally, the oblique angle enables the pictorial illusions of dynamism and recession, of movement and depth of field. Rhetorically, the term suggests something askance, covert, or furtive. As a position or embodied location, an oblique angle signals the subjective and the partial, undoing the illusion of the autonomous, rational vision of the camera. The oblique thus signified vitality, irrationality, and instability rather than detached, staid objectivity, and was a favorite of Expressionist film and Surrealist photography for this reason. Rather than being direct, analogous, or cognate, the oblique suggests circuitous, decentered, and

10. Martini and Ronchetti, “Biography,” p. 196.

11. On the cultural reception of tubular steel furniture, see Rudolf Fischer and Wolf Tegethof, eds., *Modern Wohnen: Möbeldesign und Wohnkultur der Moderne* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2016).

12. Diana C. DuPont, *Florence Henri: Artist-Photographer of the Avant-Garde* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1990), p. 132.

alternative pathways of knowing. In the 1920s, oblique angles were used widely by avant-garde photographers to transform our habits of perception and change our ways of understanding the world. More recently, the oblique view has been allied with queerness, in a political phenomenology that has mobilized positions of misalignment, marginality, and deviation to think through embodied positions of productive disruption in a world that is organized around heteronormative and phallicentric modes. “To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things,” writes Sarah Ahmed, who notes the potential of reworking habitual cultural patterns to inscribe new paths and orientations.¹³ Thus, obliquity represents a position and a direction, a spatial location and a strategy for disruption and reconfiguration, an emplacement and a frame of mind.

We are positioned to behold Henri’s frontal portrait obliquely by virtue of the camera’s position to the left, and thus subtly interpellated as voyeurs viewing from the margins. Initially, the picture conjures the illusion that we view the picture authoritatively, with all objects arrayed before us; the flat mirror is the “optical device,” as Moholy-Nagy would call it, that extends our perceptual apparatus and generates an impression of mastery. Though optically collocated in the picture plane, subject and object positions diverge, psychoanalytically speaking, for the sitter in the mirror—that Lacanian “matrix of the symbolic” that divides the unified subject between self and object, between recognition and misrecognition, securing identity for the beholder while disavowing experiential interiority.¹⁴ The self is exteriorized at the expense of being. Through her reflection in the hanging mirror, Henri becomes part of a discursive structure that precedes her, and in this case, one looped into discourses of detachment, dehumanization, and formal rigor, or of ironic-resistant feminist subjectivity.¹⁵

Deliberately excluded from view by virtue of the camera’s oblique, the material body of the sitter is delivered as immaterial, separating reality from reflection

13. Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), p. 161.

14. Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 4.

15. The mirrored balls, and in particular their placement near a projecting orthogonal, are the crux for a set of poststructuralist readings that steer away from formalist intentionality into the realm of psychosocial fortuity. In Rosalind Krauss’s brief but formative analysis of 1981, Henri’s work is inscribed within the phallicentric order via the two balls and bisecting line that suggest a phallus at the picture’s center. Arguing for a structural reciprocity between frame and image, container and contained, Krauss asserts that the phallic signifier is an internalized representation of the camera and its optical potency, the framing device an image of mastery and control within the “inchoate sprawl of the real.” Rosalind Krauss, “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” *October* 19 (Winter 1981), p. 34. For Carol Armstrong, the mirrored surfaces are structures internal to the picture that mimic the operations of the camera apparatus, in its capture, freezing, and replication of the body. As the mirror traps body, the camera traps mirror, in a system of gendered substitutions that inscribes the camera’s power and names its reflexive internality. The photographic apparatus thus emerges not as phallus but as speculum, a catoptric system of invisible interiority in which the body is caught. Carol Armstrong, “Florence Henri: A Photographic Series of 1928: Mirror, Mirror on the Wall,” *History of Photography* (Spring 1994), pp. 223–29.

and mimicking the operations of photography itself. But this mirror and this photograph obscure as much as they reveal: The work is imbued with deception while it parades the rationalist values of its moment. Contrast the substantive weight and psychological presence conveyed by two other self-portraits produced around the same time—same mirror, same space, same sitter—which take as their subject the artist's physical operation of the camera. These images instate reciprocity between the fleshy actuality of the subject and the objects of her attention, as do the series

*Henri. Self-Portrait. 1927–28.*

Henri.
Self-Portrait.
1927–28.



of double portraits of Schall and “Charly,” whose reflections and their source are captured by the camera below, providing legible narrative spaces, the satisfaction of conceptual totality, and transparency. Henri’s inexorable returns to such scenarios illuminate her investments in the exchange between referent and representation. Instead of conversational reciprocity, the asymmetry of the 1928 self-portrait proposes a power relationship in which the artist has the upper hand. In the absence of its embodied source, we are left with an apparition, unburdened by weight, something that edges the image into the magical and the uncanny, setting its rationalist project on edge. She is an illusory mirror reflection, a specular ghost that haunts as physiognomic surface data.

The solid metal balls do the work that the fleshy body does not, keeping the image from detaching into sheer pictorial hallucination. The spheres anchor the picture with their actual thingness and their weight, more so than the planes of the mirror and wooden table. The embodied, reproductive aspects of the human are displaced onto these mirrored spheres, for not only do they seem to touch, kiss, replicate, commune, and even mimic the phallus, their convex surfaces see what we cannot, lending them an agency denied us. Registered in miniature, almost illegible form on their perceptual skin is an abstraction that reveals the photographer, four-fold. This shadow has often been read as Henri herself—logically speaking, she must appear as a reflection in the mirrored balls before her—underpinning the frequent assumption that Henri used an automatic shutter release.

But look again, following the trajectory of the orthogonal line that touches her left elbow. Henri’s facing image should appear on the *right* side of the convex ball, elongated rightward by the distortions of the spherical surface. Instead, the shadow inclines in the opposite direction, leftward in the convexity and decidedly to the left of the orthogonal where the camera would be. Note the rigid linearity

of the reflections atop the left-hand ball—those wedges that register the room's window to the right—and the way they hover stiffly over the surface rather than conform organically to the sphere's curvature. They intimate the awkward artifice of a retoucher's hand and may explain how Henri's body disappeared. Henri was not averse to retouching her photographs.¹⁶ Another humanoid blur is partially visible on the right-hand edge of both right spheres, more emphatically so in the back reflection, perhaps another witness standing by the window. Judging from her other self-portraits before the mirror, Henri looks to be using a No. 2 Brownie

16. Martini and Ronchetti, "Biography," p. 198.



Henri. Double Portrait. 1927–28.

Model E, a very simple camera manufactured between 1917 and 1924 that was neither fitted with a self-timer nor compatible with a cable release.¹⁷ Someone else released the shutter with a lever on the box's side.

Though Henri's picture might appear to be solipsistic, enclosed in a detached, self-referential system, the specular relay between mirrored surfaces and camera operates within a representational circuitry that presupposes human relationality, not isolation. A mirror is a device premised on exchange. Rather than the product of a singular vision, this bifurcated self is a collaboration between the sitter Henri and the anamorphic, fourfold co-conspirator operating the camera behind her. The omniscient spheres lay bare the device of illusionism for those who are observant or patient enough to see it, but only as a distorted smudge. As disclosive surfaces often installed for decorative purposes in windows and gardens, mirrored balls would also reveal intruders to the house's inhabitants, serving as panoptica. They were variously called watch balls or witches' balls in English and *boules de sorcière* in French, and their reflective surfaces were believed to catch the evil Other and trap it in its catoptric prison.¹⁸ Folkloric uses aside, the balls, like the mirror, like photography, see what we do not. The optical unconscious is laid bare.

Revealing a complex intersubjective network that also enfolds the beholder in its discomfiting matrix, this work is neither unequivocal nor monadic. As viewers, we are sutured into the image at the level of its artifice, caught between the specular apparition before us and the omniscient gaze we intuit behind us. Made to hover mid-table, we assume a conflicted position conferred with gentle material intimacy and enclosure while being estranged from its distant human subject. We are projected within the construction, while she is outside. In a form of shot/reverse-shot staging, we are momentarily bound into a comforting experience of cognitive unity, aware of the fiction and its construction. But that satisfaction of totality yields to the unease of dispossession with the dawning realization that knowledge is controlled by the omnipotent figure behind the camera, who sees the enfleshed referent and not just the sign. Though we are woven into position with the all-knowing view, it turns out that we are only authorized to see what the murky apparition in a ball permits us to see. In a picture ripe with phallic potency, we are rendered impotent. Like the oblique structure of the fetish, also premised on a sidelong look, the photograph points to the absence of flesh, offering us a petrified reflection instead.

One might read the work as an inscription of Henri's own gendered objectification in culture, a body trapped and contained in the mirror, perpetually

17. Confirmed in an email exchange with curator Todd Gustavson, Technology Collection, George Eastman House, June 27, 2019.

18. Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History*, pp. 187–89; Margaret J. M. Ezell, "Looking Glass Histories," *Journal of British Studies* 43, no. 3 (July 2004), pp. 317–38; Richard Gregory, *Mirrors in Mind* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 62–64.

the object of the external gaze, within the context of a psychoanalytic visual analysis replayed above. But it is also possible to imagine that power lies in its very deception, refusing the beholder mastery and leaving the subject to escape view and double objectification by the camera while protecting her selfhood. The beholder cannot empathically recuperate any trace of the subject's inner life. Psychological communion between viewer and viewed is repelled and displaced onto the intimacies suggested by the illusion of four touching metal balls. In the context of interwar thought, that rift between subjective integrity and outward being, between self and self-projection, exemplifies what philosophical anthropologist Hellmuth Plessner deemed the "ex-centric" human positionality in 1928, in a book coincident with Henri's self-portrait and rooted in Husserlian phenomenology.¹⁹ As opposed to plants or animals, Plessner's humans simultaneously dwell within the bodily and project themselves out into the world; they are centric and ex-centric, "naturally artificial" beings in the world.²⁰

Importantly for my argument, ex-centricity is not sheer projective externality; it is reflexive and protective, allowing the subject to experience the self from without, to generate masks and personae, and to shield a vulnerable inner core. "Plessner's humans needed a world where they could both reveal and hide themselves," as Michael Gubser observes.²¹ Thus Henri's photograph is not only eccentric but ex-centric, staging exteriority reflexively, performatively, and defensively. The photograph reverberated in a fraught postwar cultural context in which the boundaries between self and other, between individuality and collectivity, were actively being renegotiated along personal and political lines. Though Plessner's conclusions about collectivity were ultimately pessimistic and anti-liberal, Henri's photographic vision was predicated, as I will argue, on hopeful correspondences.²² And while Plessner's alliances concerned organic structures, Henri's boundaries extended to incorporate the inorganic, the technical, and the machinic. When conceived obliquely as episodic rather than artifactual, Henri's photograph can be seen to instantiate rather than cede power in ways that are, perhaps, queer.²³

19. Hellmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*, 1928; translated by Millay Hyatt as *Levels of Organic Life and the Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

20. Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, pp. 287–300.

21. Michael Gubser, *The Far Reaches: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Social Renewal in Central Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 123.

22. Ibid., p. 123.

23. I use this term in Ahmed's rich phenomenological sense, as an off-center consciousness that disturbs order and inscribes new paths from nonnormative orientations. For a reading of Henri's photographs as haunted by queer desire and queer networks, see Elizabeth Otto, *Haunted Bauhaus: Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities, and Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), pp. 148–54. Tirza True Latimer's tightly argued *Eccentric Modernisms: Making Differences in the History of American Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017) uses the terms *eccentric* and *queer* interchangeably to signify departures from social norms and illuminate marginalized modernisms; see p. 4.

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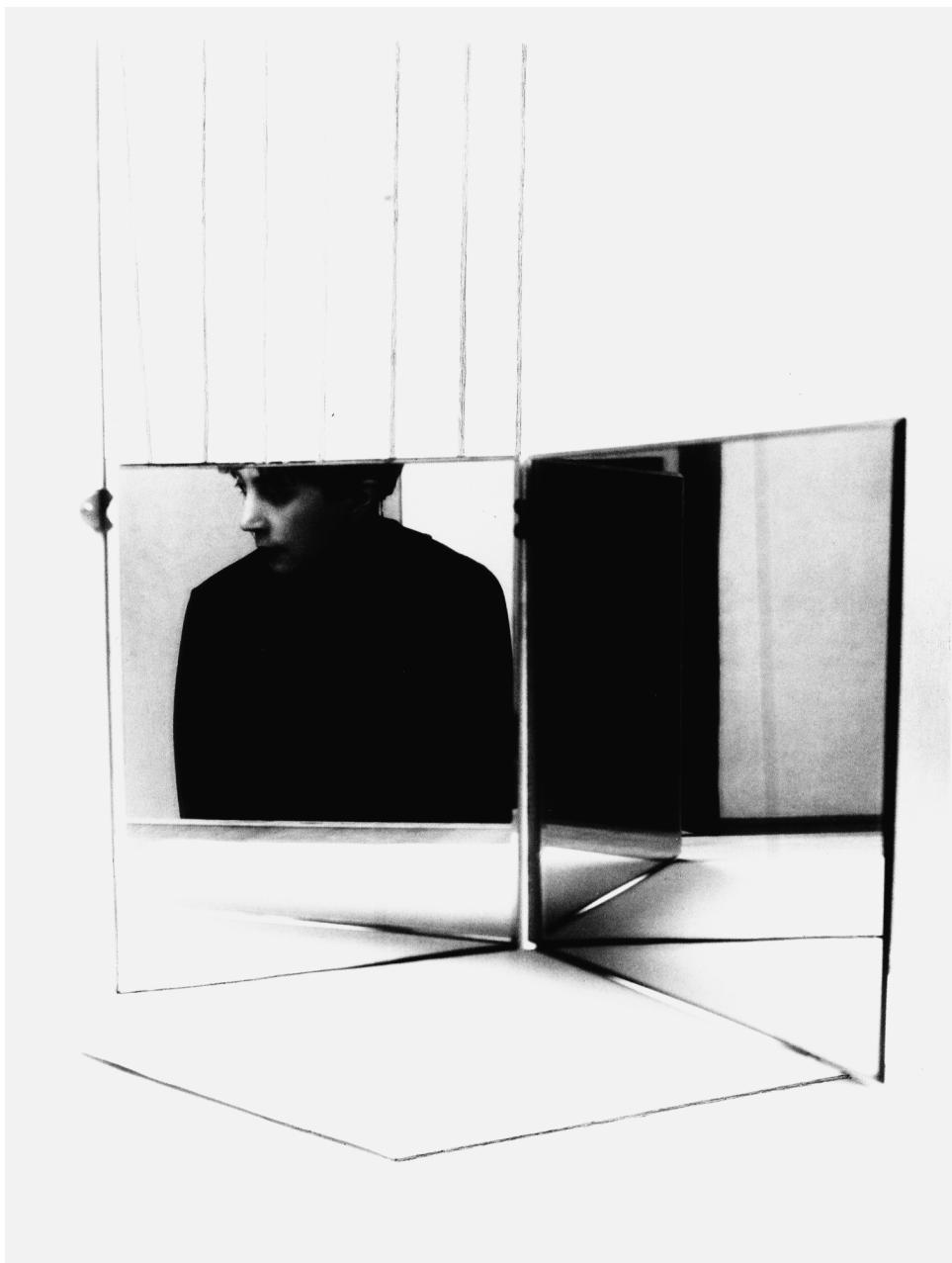
"Now for some news," wrote Henri from Paris in 1928 to her friend Lou Scheper in Germany: "I'm taking photographs. If I enjoy it, I'll give up painting (provisionally).... I'm so tired of all this painting that doesn't go anywhere [*Ich habe dieses vage in Nichts Malen so satt*], and I've got so many ideas for photographs.... I'd like to have a profession which produces results but also interests other people [*das Interesse auch anderer erregen*]."²⁴ In a formulation that pits psychosomatic surfeit (*so satt*) against a gestural void (*dieses vage Nichts*), photography here is imagined as a social conduit that *arouses* spectatorial investment. Painting remains a nebulous, solitary pursuit. The passage reveals her desire to move from formalist isolation to intersubjectivity. Henri's works, I argue, confront the limitations of a static, homologic view of the world and embrace embodied perception as dynamic, unfolding, and idiosyncratic processes, in which the boundaries between subject and object, viewer and viewed, dissolve and reconfigure inconclusively. At a moment where technology was rapidly changing perception, supplementing human vision with precision, focus, and unprecedented control, Henri's work courts perceptual instability, pulling the proverbial ground from underneath our feet. Groundlessness was equally central to the work of her close friend Carl Einstein, with whom she had an "intense relationship" beginning sometime between 1919 and 1923.²⁵ The content of their conversations can only be speculative, but Henri's painting interrogated Cubism's destabilizations while Einstein developed his critical ideas on Braque and Picasso. By then he had already published the pioneering *Negro Sculpture* of 1915, which Sebastian Zeidler has characterized as "a lost wanderer's phenomenology of space," a dialectical formalism of uprooted objects grounded in groundlessness.²⁶

Another portrait composition of 1927–28, which is a montage of photograph and drawing, is similarly designed to destabilize and frustrate. Though we find our footing in a recognizable portrait—Margarete Schall in three-quarters profile gazing introspectively to the left—the pendant mirror on the right transports us into a cubic aperture that confuses us with its various thresholds of space. Again, the mirror sees things that we do not—a third cantilevered mirror, for example, or the stable "room space" of floor and wall in the back that, if we were to use Schall's body as reference point, would be at table height. Using Henri's self-portrait as source, we can name the long vertical plane on the left as "mirror," anchoring ourselves, like with the self-portrait, in the stable and recognizable: We visually grasp the two brackets, right and left, that affix the mirror to the wall. However, that solid mirror-object disappears as soon

24. Zelich, p. 8. The German original is cited in Herbert Molderings, *Die Moderne der Fotografie*, (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2008), p. 256.

25. Giovanni Battista Martini, "Encounters with Florence Henri," in *Florence Henri*, p. 188, Giovanni Battista Martini and Alberto Ronchetti, "Biography," *ibid.*, p. 89.

26. Sebastian Zeidler, *Form as Revolt: Carl Einstein and the Ground of Modern Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 89. The rich and productive interconnections of Einstein's thought and Henri's aesthetic commitments are outside the scope of this essay but will be treated extensively in my forthcoming book project.



Henri. Portrait Composition. 1927–28.

as we try to track it upwards. It simultaneously metamorphoses into a hand-drawn line on the right while Schall's formerly stable mirror image retreats from the left-hand edge into deep space at an obtuse angle. She becomes a human reflection in an ever-shifting set of planes, a fun-house image teasing us with illusions of stability, but in fact as ambiguous as the rest of the picture. Identity is grounded in a void. What initially appear to be locatable, perpendicular room spaces shift into eccentric geometries that destroy orientation. The reproduction confuses the hand-drawn line with edge and shadow; human traces fuse with material limits and natural phenomena. We do not know where we stand. The work displaces.

This image similarly denies reciprocity or closure, offering instead fragments that lead nowhere, punctuated by the deliberately incomplete rectangle drawn at the picture's base. The line meanders off, refusing to neatly close the square, deviating in the same direction as the sitter's gaze. This perverse linear dissent finds its counterpart in the single leftward slanting line above the mirror that refuses to echo the family of parallel lines to its right. With the clarity of writing or diagramming, these marks establish intent, whereas the gentle confusions of plane, reflection, and space might leave us baffled, as in a dream with its hidden and fragmented structure.

Not unlike the gothic horror theater of nineteenth-century phantasmagoria, this destabilizing play of mirrors, lines, and photographic fragments projects an array of illusions, from introspective apparitions to disintegrating spaces, rendering the corporeal incorporeal and our emplacement dissolute. Phantasmagoria also constantly changed shape and hid its origins, emblematising, for Walter Benjamin at least, the misrepresentation that stands for the reality of life under capitalism.²⁷ Image, illusion, and exchange determine social relations; value becomes a product of transaction and desire, not substance. Henri's dialectical fiction and Benjamin's meditations on the Parisian arcades lie in the same experiential matrix, in which humans and objects increasingly exchange places.

27. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

*Henri.
Carousel Horses.
1928.*





Henri.
Carousel Swan.
1928.

An abiding interest in the thingness of humans and the humanity of things courses through Henri's work, seeking kinships and tinged with longing. Her 1928 portraits of carousel animals probe the empathic ambitions of the commodity, since these artificial beasts are engineered to seek connection with their potential riders. The shadows that fall on the horses' faces lend the picture a melancholic aspect, suggesting a frame of mind that conjures pensive yearning, while the swan's imploring look and subordinate carriage beckon the beholder to fill the gaping hole in its torso that is the rider's seat. Their *noesis* is predicated on longing and lack, pointing to absence of connection while promising to fill it—the exact inverse enacted by the two portraits above. Contrast the petrified arrest of the *Tailor's Mannequin* of 1930–31, whose strained congeniality is rendered all the more alienating through the oblique perspective. It not only fails to connect humanly but materializes that



Henri. Tailor's Mannequin. 1930–31.

false attempt. In the balance of human/nonhuman that Henri persistently pursues, the human dummy exemplifies detachment enveloped in inauthenticity while the animal forms assume a congenial, even hopeful, co-presence. Though these works can be assimilated into the category of the Surrealist uncanny and thus represent what has been called Henri's Surrealist modernism, they accumulate alternative and perhaps more indicative meanings when recontextualized by other photographs composed in the same year.²⁸ Ineluctably drawn to the dynamics of isolation and empathy, these works play out self-encounters as other-encounters that query the operations of subjecthood in the world.

A series of compositions involving lone reflective balls in the company of mirrors seem to identify with or disavow their reflection, thus directing their “attention” to self or the imagined beholder. It is as if their surfaces, a fusion of eyes and skin, perceive. Bound in by the oblique angle of viewing, we happen upon their self-reflection accidentally, voyeuristically, witness to a scenario that for Carol Armstrong is uncanny, spectral, and nihilistic.

28. Hal Foster's *Compulsive Beauty* (MIT Press, 1993) remains the definitive work on the subject.

[I]t looks like nothing more than a thing without eyes, without a gaze, gazing at itself, like “someone” without features or psyche, without interiority or exteriority, without individuality, blindly looking at its likeness, a likeness that has no meaning, because the thing in itself, its “front” the same as its “back” and the same as its “profile” view as well . . . everywhere alike and identical to every other member of its object species.²⁹

And yet, without undoing the preternatural charge of Armstrong's description, I argue that these balls also “dwell” insistently before us, manifesting a within-ness, a primal element of being that is solidly located on a horizontal plane, while their surfaces bear traces of the relational networks that define them in the here and now. In my reading, they are less spectral and more ontological, studies of being and being-with that place their interrogations in alignment with Heidegger's *Being and Time*, published the previous year.³⁰ These balls “mean” because they are. Their location in front of a mirror, that symbol of *vanitas*, situates them in the matrix of temporality, death, and limitation that Heidegger attributes to the human quality of *Dasein*, and not just the *Sein* of things. They teeter on the tightrope of subjectivity and thinghood, at once inert and yet suffused with an uncanny psychology. In at least two of these compositions, an accident “befalls” the entity, victim of a toppled metallic rack (or two) whose now-oblique disposition instantiates contingency, fallenness, while trapping the sphere beneath the prison of geometric regularity that extends and multiplies through specular space.

What I am suggesting is that Henri's series of photographic experiments in formal composition, which continually orbit issues of equivocal presence, thing-



Top and bottom:
Henri. Composition. 1928.

29. Armstrong, “Florence Henri: A Photographic Series of 1928,” p. 223.

30. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).

ness, empathy, and alienation, amount to a set of investigations about subjecthood in a material world whose apparent technological-industrial rationality is subtended by volatility, vulnerability, madness. While they outwardly insist on the “objective vision” that photography and other optical devices claim to make possible, seeming to instantiate the world, often from multiple vantage points, as something to be “known,” ordered, and controlled, their oblique perspectives remind us that this “new vision” stems from a first-person standpoint, a contingent “I” that apprehends the world mediated by desire, longing, lack, power, perversion—what Heidegger would call *Befindlichkeit*, or perceptual affect or mood. Their repetition and their urgency—which lent Henri the psychic impetus to assemble subjects/objects in space for several years and then photograph them—have less to do with a dogged devotion to the aesthetic task of composition than to holding fast a set of relationships between and among things for interrogation. Part of that formula includes a commitment in the camera’s access to “the real” in ways that her abstract compositions in paint failed to sustain. The photographic stakes involve suspending perception in a mediated, machinic age that objectifies and externalizes, holds at a distance and makes concrete that which is ephemeral, abstract, and invisible, at the same time that the medium summons proximity and analogy like no other.³¹

Henri’s investigations, which found broad public resonance in the late 1920s and ’30s as insistently “modern,” speak to a set of subtending concerns about Being in an increasingly technologically determined world whose terms simultaneously empower and subordinate the human subject.³² The impelling force, of course, was the technological warfare that decimated the European landscape and psyche, the reverberations of which were still palpitating beneath a mantle of repression. Though scientific and philosophical investigations into mind and matter preceded the war—I think here of Husserl and Freud, but also of Franz Brentano (from whom Husserl took the term “intention”) and Wilhelm Wundt (against whose empiricism phenomenology was directed)—they adopted a momentum and urgency in the postwar moment that amounted to a small revolution on the border between France and Germany in the university town of

31. On analogy and photography, see Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or, The History of Photography, Part I* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

32. In addition to the 1929 FIFO show and accompanying catalogue, Henri’s photographs were included in major international photography exhibitions, including the 1929 *Fotografie der Gegenwart* at the Museum Folkwang in Essen, which traveled to Hanover, Berlin, Dresden, and Magdeburg; *Das Lichtbild* in Munich in 1930, which traveled to Essen, Düsseldorf, Dessau, and Breslau; *Die neue Fotografie*, in Basel in 1931; *Foreign Advertising Photography*, in New York, 1931; three exhibitions of modern photography in London’s Royal Photography Society in 1932, 1933, and 1934; and *International Photographers*, in the Brooklyn Museum in 1932, to cite a few salient examples. Her work was repeatedly singled out in reviews, and the journal of the German Werkbund, *Die Form*, published three Henri photographs to illustrate an article by photographer Sasha Stone. In addition, Beaumont Newhall included her work in a New York MoMA brochure in 1937, and the photographer Ilse Bing moved to Paris in 1929 to work near Henri. Zelich, “Florence Henri’s Photography,” pp. 197–201, DuPont, *Florence Henri*, p. 145.

Freiburg. Here founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl attracted a coterie of thinkers embarking on the contentious study of embodied consciousness in the material world, including Edith Stein, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Emmanuel Levinas. In 1929, Maurice Merleau-Ponty attended Husserl's lectures in Paris; in 1933, Jean-Paul Sartre went to Berlin to read Husserl, which became the basis of his existentialist philosophy. These are names that represent some of the most innovative, far-reaching thinking in response to the shocks of the twentieth century.³³ As multifarious and complicated as phenomenology was to become, at its core is the understanding that consciousness is corporeal and intentional, directed toward things in the world; it is also explicitly subjective and implicitly intersubjective. Its method: Describe phenomena, returning to things themselves and to the *qualities* of experience before things. Phenomenology offered its practitioners both orientation and liberation in moments of profound social and cultural dislocation, an extreme manifestation of that state of human being that Heidegger called "thrown-ness" (*Geworfenheit*), the arbitrary, groundless temporality of human existence, of "not being in control of one's basis or foundation," as Kaja Silverman formulates it.³⁴ That groundlessness, though destabilizing, also revealed the potential of a new beginning intentionally anchored in the material world.

*

I am. We are.

That is enough. Now we have to begin. Life has been put in our hands. For itself it became empty long ago. It pitches senselessly back and forth, but we stand firm, and so we want to be its initiative and we want to be its ends.

Thus begins the secular genesis staged in Ernst Bloch's preface, or *Absicht* (intention), to his messianic Marxist treatise *The Spirit of Utopia*, which was written during World War I, published in 1918, and reworked in 1923 to incorporate his new political inclinations.³⁵ The second version, from which the above quote is drawn, differs from the first slightly but significantly by opening with instantia-

33. There are few historical overviews of phenomenology that reflect on the sociohistorical context of its flourishing. The most expansive scholarly account of phenomenology's sociopolitical scope is Michael Gubser, *The Far Reaches: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Social Renewal in Central Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). Sarah Bakewell has distilled the socially radical implications of phenomenology in the popular account *At the Existentialist Café* (London: Vintage Books, 2016).

34. Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 34.

35. Ernst Bloch, *Spirit of Utopia*, translation Anthony A. Nasser, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 1.

tions of consciousness—I am. We are.—followed by a pregnant silent space that offers the simple assertion of ego consciousness as ground zero for reinventing life after catastrophe. The book proceeds with a self-encounter rooted in phenomenology, a perceptual experience with a series of objects—an old pitcher, a glass. Its ambition is to break through the falseness of the world to some form of authenticity, leading from the self, via ornament and the history of music, to what he calls the “we problem,” the problem of community. The point of origin, an encounter with things, offers a fundamental basis for forging a new path in an uncertain world. “[T]hat is why we go, why we cut new, metaphysically constitutive paths, summon what is not, build into the blue, and build ourselves into the blue, and there seek the true, the real, where the merely factual disappears—*incipit vita nova*.³⁶

Building new constitutive paths out of matter: This would aptly describe the radical utopian project of the Bauhaus of the 1920s, one equally committed to the role of experience—tactile, visual, corporeal—in the construction of a new object environment in which the modern human being would reorient him- or herself.³⁷ And it was in this very environment that Henri briefly encountered phenomenal explorations of materials and media that were provocative enough for her to relinquish painting for photography. Inverting the coordinates of Bloch’s path, Henri moved from music to painterly abstraction to the (photographic) apprehension of things in order to address the issue of relationships in the world. Trained as a pianist, she abandoned her musical education in Berlin during the war to study painting, albeit with Johannes Walter-Kurau, whose method drew inspiration from musical harmonies.³⁸ In 1925, she moved to Paris and enrolled at the Académie Moderne to study with Fernand Léger, Amédée Ozenfant, and André Lhote. Her abstract paintings and collages were regularly exhibited, including at the Salon d’Automne, and published in the prestigious *Cahiers d’Art*. Writing to a friend in 1926 that she was just as fascinated by Bauhaus master Georg Muche “as by Moholy-Nagy and the furniture,” Henri took a subsequent detour to Dessau that reconstituted her own creative path.³⁹

“Above all, what I want with photography is to compose the image as I do with painting,” Henri asserted retrospectively, in a statement that illustrates a remarkable confidence in intentionality.⁴⁰ “The volumes, lines, shadows, and light must respond to my intention,” she continued, “and say what I want them to say.”

36. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, p. 11.

37. See Leah Dickerman, “Bauhaus Fundaments,” in *Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity*, ed. Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), pp. 15–39, for a lucid discussion of the role of experience in Bauhaus teaching and thinking.

38. DuPont, *Florence Henri*, p. 130.

39. Ibid., p. 131.

40. Zelich, “Florence Henri’s Photography,” p. 11.

And all this under the strict control of the composition, as I'm not aiming to explain the world or explain my thoughts. Everything I know and the way in which I know it is primarily made up of abstract elements: spheres, planes and grids, the parallel lines of which provide me with huge resources, and also mirrors which I use to present the same object from different angles in a single photograph in order to present different visions of a single motif that are complementary and which succeed in explaining it better, interacting with each other. In the end this is much harder to explain than to do. . . . You will undoubtedly perceive that I often talk about composition. That is because this idea is everything to me.⁴¹

Privileging conscious control over unconscious articulation, Henri's retroactive assessment of her photographic work (she returned to painting after 1945) certainly manifests her commitment to the "abstracting mechanically formalist discourse" that Rosalind Krauss rightly noted "straightjackets" her reception, but also latently reveals what one might call a phenomenological sensibility vis-à-vis knowledge, objects, and intentionality.⁴² One might say that with sleight of hand and mirrors, Henri escapes the restraints that bind her. Composition is the key word here, a term that describes not the assemblage but *how* the assemblage has been arranged, while knowledge is bound up with forms "interacting with each other" to explain a concept better than language can. "*Everything I know and the way in which I know it is primarily made up of abstract elements.*" Displacements, as Silverman notes, are at the heart of psychic life.⁴³

Window of 1935 locates us in an interior space, looking through the aperture and through the window to an adjacent building. Though our eyes are asked to traverse the boundary between inside and outside, the space of embodied location and the space beyond, the picture is really about the peripheral, or about that which we see from the margins of our perception. We witness an encounter between two shadows that resemble heads, looking, facing, considering each other in a mutual regard, though they are just things—the shutter's handles blurred. Perception or orientation from the margins, from an oblique view, is a decentered view, as Ahmed notes, one that orients the embodied subject queerly such that we lose ground or lose hold of the familiar.⁴⁴ The result is a perceptual experience that warrants a double take, that second look to make sure we are in our right mind. This uncanny apprehension also confuses the site of origin—does the misperception happen from within or is it provoked from without? It is a vital strangeness that resides somewhere between the body and its objects, perpetually destabilizing us. Henri, who moved fluidly between hetero-

41. Ibid.

42. Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," p. 4.

43. Silverman, *World Spectators*, p. 42.

44. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 161–64.



Henri. Window. 1935.

sexual and homosexual relationships, having long-term attachments with both men and women, and who also moved fluidly among national identities, variously identified as Swiss, Italian, German, Polish, American, and French during a period where nationalisms signified strongly, lived and oriented herself pluralistically in the international avant-garde, though by virtue of her gender and sexuality, she operated from a margin. For Merleau-Ponty, the oblique view or things perceived from an angle signify distance, a retreating object that “begins to slip away from the hold of our gaze and . . . joins with it less strictly”; things viewed from a straight, direct, head-on perspective signify proximity.⁴⁵ In a work such as *Window*, we perceive both intimately and at a distance, we possess proximate knowledge while registering that certainty slips from our grasp.

I conclude my ruminations about Henri’s oblique kinship with things more directly with a peculiar and rather uncharacteristic portrait of 1928. It is easily interpreted as yet another example of the artist being interested in frames—the framing of the photograph, the framing of the self—and another formal exercise in horizontal and vertical structures in which the artist seems to

45. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 273.



Henri. Self-Portrait. 1928.

compress and subsume her body into the hard metal quadrilateral of tubular steel. The composition is all lines and structure with a wistful, tilted face enclosed in its center, bearing a downward gaze directed at both beholder and camera resignedly but affectionately. In this self-portrait, the embrace of the human by technological form is quite literal, enclosed as she is within its cold metal appendages. Had she offered the camera a blank face as in the self-portrait with balls, this configuration would read effortlessly as a dystopian commentary on the mechanization of the human in the modern age, a thing among things, the anomie and alienation under capitalism. Nor is she a *Prospektfigur*, a

media typos of detached aloofness intended to illustrate the commodity's functionality for the consumer.⁴⁶ Her direct address and relaxed corporeality suggest an amenable intertwining of subject and object; in Plessner's terms, her fleshy boundary is not an indifferent barrier but actively takes a position with respect to its surroundings, staking an existential claim.⁴⁷ We might even interpret this configuration as a set of companionable correspondences between the human and the industrial nonhuman, the *ich-du/I-Thou* (rather than I-It) relationship that Martin Buber imagined between the human and its object environment in 1923.⁴⁸ It is a strange, even reluctant, kinship because it calls human autonomy and primacy into question.⁴⁹ *Incipit vita nova.*

46. Magdalena Droste, "Stahlrohrstühle als Objekte medialer Bildstrategien und ihr doppeltes Leben," in Fischer and Tegethoff, *Modern Wohnen*, p. 191.

47. Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, pp. 94–99.

48. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1923), trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

49. Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy: The History of Photography, Part I*, p. 11.