Text written on the occasion of the exhibiton *Elisa Sighicelli, Petits Rats*, Hong Kong, Rossi & Rossi Gallery, 2023

Sculpture in Context: Digressions around *Petits Rats* by Elisa Sighicelli

Simone Menegoi

In 1913, whilst preparing the reissue of his monograph dedicated to Auguste Rodin, Rainer Maria Rilke argued with the publisher about the book's illustrations. The latter, Anton Kippenberg, had managed to secure the publishing rights to some of the photographs of the *Monument to Balzac* made by Edward Steichen. These famous pictures, taken in 1908 in the park of Rodin's villa in Meudon, reproduced the sculpture in some night shots. Towering high and white on its base, glimmering in moonlight, the work is turned by Steichen's pictures into a supernatural apparition. Rodin manifested his enthusiasm for the American photographer's interpretation, comparing it to 'Christ marching in the desert'.[I]

However, Rilke did not share his enthusiasm, and in a letter sent to Kippenberg on 5 December of that same year, he wrote that:

> the style of these photos…is corresponding very well with the actual tendency of Rodin's artistry, that is why he is so satisfied with the effects sought and obtained by the photographer; however, while these effects are still a part of his great work, still they seem to me as converging towards the weaker aspect of it especially where the interpretation percolating from the outside diffuses more easily.[II]

In contrast to Steichen, Rilke credited his predilection to another artist: Eugène Druet. An amateur photographer much less referenced than Steichen, Druet had collaborated systematically with Rodin between 1897 and 1900, enjoying the latter's deep esteem. To guess the reasons for Rilke's choice, suffice to cast a glance at his pictures, one may begin with those included by Rodin in his great Parisian exhibition of 1900. Approaching the work of this iconic sculptor on tiptoe – as was proper for a *photographe amateur* obliged to shoot inside Rodin's atelier or in depots – Druet was able to turn photographic limitations into strengths. Taken into the twilight of a warehouse or in the full light of the atelier, Rodin's sculptures are charged by a particular psychological intensity, or an 'uncanny' one, to use a term that would become an essential part of the psychological vocabulary a few years later. They are fixed human figures that, as in Pygmalion's myth, seem on the verge of becoming alive at any moment. Framed from the waist up, Balzac appears to look out of the atelier window, eager to mingle with the stirring life of his novels: *Eva*, silhouetted against a screen, is a young woman who modestly turns her back on the observer; the *Burghers of Calais*, seen in profile from the shoulders up, not in the arrangement in which they are usually portrayed but leaning against a wall, become the spectators of an unbearable scene that takes place outside of the frame.

However, even when they so ingeniously take advantage of the narrative cues offered by the situation, Druet's pictures are not loaded with anything artificial. They are not affected by a staging. Definitely, the arrangement of the sculptures is not dictated by the exigences of their shooting, but by those of their processing or storage. These images do not allow us to make an abstraction either from the material reality of the works – pieces of marble and plaster, like the blocks and fragments of the same materials scattered all around – or the reality of studio work, whose instruments appear regularly inside of frames.

When Steichen conceived his famous portrait of Rodin posing between *The Thinker* and the *Monument to Victor Hugo*, he strove to exclude the context of the atelier using two different close shots (and two different negatives), composing them in the final image.[III] Nothing of the kind is to be found in Druet – even when he resorts to elementary tricks, such as a blanket to isolate a sculpture from the background or other works, or a detail at the edge of the frame that points to the context of the atelier. Even when, rather rarely, that detail is missing, the material reality, be it of bronze, marble or cloth, that Steichen tends to erase through dark-room manipulations is maintained by Druet, and thus imposing to the observer. The appeal of these photographs lies in the tension between the appearance of life conferred to the sculptures and what, from the inside of their images, contradicts it.

* * *

Rodin's *Burghers*, which offer themselves as hostages to rescue their city, Calais, besieged by British soldiers in 1347, are portrayed with a rope tied around their necks; they are voluntary captives, maybe destined to death. The bronze danseuses by Edgar Degas that have been conserved in the deposits of MASP, the Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand in Brazil, equally have a rope around their necks (or, more rarely, around their arms), the string to which is attached their classifying label. Exploring the depots of the Brazilian museum in search of subjects to photograph, as she had already done in the depots of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Milan,[IV] Elisa Sighicelli focussed her lens on the corpus of Degas's bronzes: seventy-three pieces, all castings from wax, clay and plasticine sculptures found in the artist's studio after his death.[V] Further restricting the field, she decided to concentrate only on bronzes portraying dancers in various postures. The positions of these young danseuses – *petits rats*, as they were called – point more often to warm-ups and rehearsals than choreographic interpretations. Here, a girl, hands on her loins, arches to relax the muscles of her back; there, another, balances on her left leg and turns backwards, grasping her right foot and keeping it suspended to examine it; a third figure, equally balanced on the left leg, leans forwards in the apparent act of putting on a stocking. Some of the dancers modelled by Degas have tutus and slippers; those portrayed by Sighicelli are nude, probably resulting from the sculptor's desire to deepen the study of their anatomy.

Grouped together on the shelves of the museum's warehouse, the sculptures create a real *corps de ballet* intent on preparing for rehearsals or already busy executing the dance steps. The approach here is one of playing on the fundamental variables of photographic reprise – lens angulation, framing cut, illumination – in order to produce a set of appealing tableaux in which the statuettes created individually by Degas are running a mutual dialogue. An arm thrown forwards seems to be a gesture addressed to a companion; a backwards glance somehow intercepts another; the gesture of examining the raised foot, replicated with minimal differences in two sculptures, turns from individual movement to shared exercise. The arrangement of the photographic prints on the walls of the Rossi & Rossi gallery underlines these narrative cues through a design that the artist defines as 'cinematographic'.[VI] For example, the series of four images that hinge on the two figures turned backwards with the foot raised in the hand offers the impression of seeing the tracking shot of a camera moving from left to right. The size of the prints, that, if one looks at them in the same order, first increases then decreases, suggests a zoom in and a zoom out. Finally, the lighting – a spotlight that casts clear shadows – brings to mind that limelight effect rendered in such an admirable way by Degas.

Sighicelli did not change the position of the sculptures in any way, nor did she try to conceal the context in which the photographs were taken. Although the lighting gives

the impression of a stage, the recurring detail of an enamelled iron upright at the edge of the frame, or a piece of plastic packaging that peeps between the bases of the figures, reminds us that the resting plane of the danseuses is the shelf of a warehouse. And although the images, playing on the ambiguity of scaling, make the bronze bodies appear life-size at times, the labels hanging around their necks reveal them for what they are: statuettes about forty centimetres tall. The closer shots are responsible for highlighting their synthetic and fast modelling, oblivious to the detailing of the sculptures. On the backs, hips and thighs of the dancers, the traces left by the modelling spatula are clearly visible; where one would expect a face, there is only a shapeless mass of matter.

* * *

The life of a work of art is not only spent in galleries or museums, but also in warehouses, in private houses of collectors, corporate boardrooms, auction house showrooms and so forth. This is the fundamental assumption of the work of Louise Lawler. All of the photographic work of this American artist is dedicated to the relationship between art – great modern art of Europe and America in particular – and the diverse contexts where artworks are placed, showing how the latter element definitely influences the perception of the former. Taken amongst the knickknacks of a collector's house, the painting once hailed as revolutionary becomes another object amongst the luxury of the *décor*. Portrayed on a packing blanket awaiting its assemblage, a minimalist sculpture thus returns to its primitive status of mass-produced industrial material.

A work photographed several times by Lawler over the years is the *Petite danseuse de quatorze ans* (*Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*) (1878–81), the only sculpture shown in public by Degas. The original version, in pigmented wax and fabric, is at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Its twenty-nine known bronze versions are dispersed throughout various museums of the world, often as an integral part of the group of sculptures cast after the death of the artist. (This is the case of the work conserved at MASP.[vii]) A couple of Lawler's images portray the sculpture within exhibition contexts; another one shows a simple detail caught against a neutral background, including the right side of the tutu and bodice, the high side of the thighs and a portion of the right arm. Replicated in three different colour tones, this image has been presented as a triptych under the title *Marie + 90 (Ensemble)* (2010–12). The name 'Marie' references Marie van Goethem, the danseuse of the Opéra national de Paris who posed for the sculpture between 1878 and 1880, when she was fourteen years old.

The choice to concentrate on a detail of the work, apparently excluding any reference to its context, is not usual for Lawler, but does have its reasons. At the first and only presentation in public by Degas, *La petite danseuse* caused a scandal for its style and its subject. Today, and partly in response to that first reception, it raises opposed but no-less-intense reactions. It is probably this conflicting variety of reactions, what the American artist considers the real context of the work (so recognisable that a detail is enough to evoke it), that explain the series of chromatic variations of the image drawn from it. For the bourgeois public of the Parisian salons, the realism of the sculpture, a wax statue dressed in actual clothes, was more a fairground attraction than a creation of art, whereas for us and our eyes, it foreshadows the uncanny quality of Surrealist sculpture. For Degas's contemporaries, the little danseuse was socially despicable (many *petit rats* came from poor families) and morally reprehensible as a subject (the danseuses were often maintained by wealthy patrons in exchange for sexual favours). For us, the little danseuse is now a textbook case of the economic and social conditions that, in the highly civilised Paris of the late nineteenth century, forced minor girls to give themselves to adult men, and of the brutal sexism that blamed this practice on

them as if it were a matter of free choice. Commenting on the sculpture with the same disdain he would have felt before encountering a minor in flesh and blood in a brothel, Paul Mantz, revealing the deeply insulting backside of the expression *petits rats* (literally, 'small rats') wrote:

> With bestial effrontery she moves her face forward, or rather her little muzzle – and this word is completely correct because the little girl is the beginning of a rat.… Why is she so ugly? Why is her forehead, half covered by her hair, marked already, like her lips, with a profoundly vicious character?[viii]

More than a century afterwards, Germaine Greer, one of the most eminent figures of Anglo-Saxon feminism of the 1970s, quoted Mantz's words in her review of a great exhibition of Degas. Her reply to the French critic references the nude version of the *Petite danseuse*, a study for the dressed figure, also cast after the artist's death. Greer notes:

> If the nude figure is disturbing, it is because the child is underdeveloped for her stated age, because her breasts are mere buds on her narrow ribcage, because her pelvis is shallow and unformed and her belly slack and protuberant, because her thighs are wasted and her knees almost rachitic. This is what passed by gas footlights for a sylph – an undernourished child for whom dancing was a one-way ticket to prostitution.[ix]

* * *

Sighicelli choose not to photograph the copy of the *Petite danseuse* conserved at MASP. Immediately identifiable as a subject, disturbing on a psychological level, burdened by an impressive critical literature, the work would have 'stolen the scene' – to use an expression borrowed from the world of theatre – from any other sculpture of the fund to which it belongs. In fact, its presence hovers over all her companions, including all we know about the relationship that tied the French artist to the danseuses, beginning with Marie van Goethem. This relationship was profoundly ambivalent: the strong predilection for young dancers as an artistic subject was accompanied by the lack of scruples in forcing them to pose for hours until exhaustion, in uncomfortable and painful postures. The nonconformist choice to portray low-class, independent women and workers – not only dancers, but also laundresses, ironers, milliners – did not exclude a misogynous mentality; the absence of lascivious winks in depicting the female body was less the fruit of a sympathetic approach than the detachment of the pathologist (or rather, the zoologist: in a letter, Degas defines the danseuses as 'little monkey girls'[x]). Greer again:

> When the work comes together…it becomes apparent that Degas's detachment is beyond cruelty. He is like the painter in Zola's novel, *L'Oeuvre*, who cannot stop painting his wife's dead face because he is fascinated by the way the color of her skin is changing.[xi]

Therefore, we face a double, murky background underlying the many depictions of the danseuses by Degas: their social condition (and consideration) and the relationship that the artist had with them. This background is evidently one of the reasons that prompted Sighicelli to choose the MASP danseuses as her subject. More precisely, it is the casual and revealing coincidence between that background and the way in which the sculptures appeared to her in museum storage: crowded together with a string and a tag attached to each of their necks, as prisoners or objects for sale. Even knowing that we are dealing with some bronze statuettes and that the tag is just a harmless

classification plate (assuming that each classification, after Michel Foucault, could be termed 'harmless' without a second thought), it's difficult to get rid of the impression of observing a group of slave girls waiting to be sold – an impression contending the primate of immediacy to the image of a group of young danseuses rehearsing a choreography. After all, with all we know about the girls who posed for the sculptures, the two images – *petit rats*, little slaves – partially overlap.

In conclusion, Sighicelli's operation is also twofold. On the one hand, like other photographers did in the past, she plays on the contrast between the impression of the life of figurative sculpture and its reality as an inert thing, intentionally caught in a context that makes the latter evident. On the other hand, she suggests that 'context', for a conscious artist of the early twenty-first century, is not limited to the location of a work of art, but it extends to its cultural, social, ideological implications. Sighicelli's danseuses are suspended not only between their appearance of life and their reality as objects, but also between grace and oppression, independence and submission, dignity and degradation. Such they were to Degas's eyes and such they are to ours, thanks to the mediation of her lens.

---

[i] Hélène Pinet, 'Vos photographies feront comprendre au monde mon Balzac'. Edward Steichen et Rodin, in Hélène Pinet (ed.), *Rodin et la Photographie*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée Rodin, 2007), p. 194.
[ii] Quoted in Sylvester Engbrox, 'L'émancipation d'une nouvelle discipline artistique, la photograhie', in Hélène Pinet (ed.), *Rodin et la photograhie*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée Rodin, 2007), pp. 20–21 and notes 8 and 9.
[iii] Ibid., data sheet by Hélène Pinet about Edward Steichen, *Rodin – Le penseur*, 1902, p. 208.
[iv] Paola Zatti (ed.), *Elisa Sighicelli: As Above, So Below*, exh. cat. (Milan: Galleria d'Arte Moderna, 2022).
[v] On the subject of Degas's posthumous castings, see Joseph S. Czestochowski and Anne Pingeot, *Degas sculptures: Catalogue raisonné of the bronzes* (New York and Memphis: International Arts – Torch Press, 2002).
[vi] Telephone conversation with the author on 3 May 2023.
[vii] See the detailed sheet about the bronze example on site at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/196439, consulted on 13 May 2023.
[viii] Quoted in Germane Greer, 'Degas's dancers are studies in cruel reality. But don't go thinking he felt compassion for them', *The Guardian* online, 12 January 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/jan/12/degas-women-germaine-greer, consulted on 13 May 2023.
[ix] Ibidem.
[x] Julia Fiore, 'The Sordid Truth Behind Degas's Ballet Dancers', 1 October 2019, *Artsy* online, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-sordid-truth-degass-ballet-dancers, consulted on 13 May 2023.
[xi] Quoted in Germane Greer, 'Degas's dancers are studies in cruel reality. But don't go thinking he felt compassion for them', *The Guardian* online, 12 January 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/jan/12/degas-women-germaine-greer, consulted on 13 May 2023.