



Definitively Unfinished Sculpture: Rodin to Nauman

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In February 1876 Auguste Rodin, then thirty-six years old, left Brussels for Italy. He traveled through Turin, Genoa, and Pisa before reaching Florence in March. The previous year had witnessed major celebrations in the latter city to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of Michelangelo Buonarroti's birth.¹ Rodin sought out the Basilica of San Lorenzo, where he sketched the Medici Chapel, designed by Michelangelo, and made a drawing after the Renaissance master's unfinished sculpture *Madonna and Child* of 1521–34 (fig. 1), also known as the *Medici Madonna*.² Rodin then went to Rome to see Michelangelo's frescoes in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel before continuing to Naples to study its antique sculptures. Upon his return to Brussels in the spring of 1876, Rodin attempted to apply the lessons he had learned from Michelangelo to his own work and, in particular, to use them to help him complete his sculpture *The Age of Bronze* (1876), which he had struggled to finish before his Italian sojourn.

A trip through Italy was long an essential part of the education of any serious artist, but this one was different. While for many the firsthand study of Renaissance and Classical precedents was precisely an indoctrination into the academic canon, for Rodin it had a transformative impact; as he unequivocally stated, "My liberation



Fig. 1. Michelangelo Buonarroti (Italian, 1475–1564), *Madonna and Child (Medici Madonna)*, 1521–34. Marble, H. 89 in. (226 cm). Basilica of San Lorenzo, Florence

from academicism was via Michelangelo.³ The late Kirk Varnedoe even went so far as to call Rodin's 1876 journey "one of the seminal events in modern art."⁴ Why should this be the case? The answer lies in his subsequent retooling of the *non finito* aesthetic of Michelangelo's accidentally unfinished sculptures to impart a very modern effect of incompleteness to his own finished works. Indeed, Rodin's response to Michelangelo is a prime example of the "accident" becoming the canon, establishing a connection between artists from different periods and revealing how unfinished works could give birth to new styles. This phenomenon is central to our consideration of the way in which the gradual acceptance and assimilation of the unfinished is a vital, and often untold, story in Modernism's development.

Rodin's *Orpheus and Eurydice* (pl. 133) exemplifies the artist's interpretation of Michelangelo's oft-quoted remark that the complete form of his sculpture is imprisoned in the marble block from which it emerges. This composition was originally conceived to depict a poem from Charles Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* (1857) as part of Rodin's project *The Gates of Hell* (begun 1880 and left unfinished), but it was later withdrawn from the ensemble, retitled, and given life

as an independent work. Here, Rodin played with the sculpting process by deliberately exaggerating the chisel marks in the rough marble that surrounds the more fully carved and polished figures of Orpheus and Eurydice. This sculpture is most certainly finished, even as it adopts the *non finito* aesthetic of Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures.

The concept of *non finito* is also fittingly expressed in Rodin's *Hand of God* (pl. 132). An allegory of inchoate matter becoming animate in the hand of the creator, it demonstrates the way in which form, material, and process can be interdependent. Hands were a favorite subject of Rodin's;⁵ here, the polished and more fully realized form of the hand emerges from a block of marble left deliberately rough and unmodeled. Representing the act of creation, it foregrounds the carving of sculpture as a process of subtraction, as opposed to painting, which is one of addition.

The lessons in carving that Rodin learned from Michelangelo, as manifested in *The Hand of God*, appear to have been passed on to Louise Bourgeois in *Untitled (No. 2)* of 1996 (pl. 140). In 1938 the young Bourgeois, then twenty-seven, studied at the Académie Scandinave in Paris with Charles Despiau, who had been Rodin's assistant between 1907 and 1914.⁶ As

with Rodin, a trip to Italy was pivotal for Bourgeois. In 1967, she visited Pietrasanta, a town in Tuscany whose quarries had provided marble for sculptors such as Arnolfo di Cambio, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, and Michelangelo, among others. By that point Bourgeois had already been producing sculpture for more than two decades, but this visit and another to Carrara proved instrumental; she returned regularly into the 1990s and made several sculptures there. *Untitled (No. 2)*, carved from pink marble, juxtaposes the roughly hewn stone block of the base against two pairs of smoothly polished hands. Here the embryonic Modernist aesthetic of the deliberately "unfinished," as pioneered by Rodin and referencing Michelangelo, has itself become a recognizable style. This contrast is reflected in Bourgeois's comment on the almost schizophrenic process of working in marble: "You hack away, which is aggressive, and then you polish what you have made, and you oil it and you take care of it."⁷

While a narrative of a deliberately "unfinished" style — in which an artist observes the fascinating anomaly of an incomplete work, such as an unresolved sculpture by Michelangelo, and creates something new from it — can be traced in these examples of carving in stone, it can also apply to works that have recourse to other inchoate materials. Rodin's contemporary and artistic rival Medardo Rosso, who was born in Turin in 1858 and studied at the Accademia di Brera in Milan, was also thinking through the legacy of Michelangelo's *non finito* in order to fashion an entirely new sculptural aesthetic. He owned at least one small-scale cast of Michelangelo's *Medici Madonna*, the same sculpture that had interested Rodin, and he used it as the modello for his own casts in bronze and wax over plaster. He even photographed one of these casts alongside his own works in his *Photomontage with Medici Madonna* of about 1900 (pls. 138, 139).

Rosso explored casting and modeling in a range of materials, including bronze and gesso, but most notably he made figures half emerging from amorphous mounds of wax. These works consider not just the figural subjects but also their atmospheric surroundings in an effort to translate the *non finito* aesthetic of Michelangelo's sculptures, the sfumato of Leonardo da Vinci's paintings, and the Impressionist emphasis on the fleeting and transitory into an entirely new sculptural form — one that is not properly modeled and "finished" in the conventional sense, which in part is what makes it so original and innovative.⁸ As Sharon Hecker writes about Rosso's choice of the mutable material of wax: "Like

Michelangelo and Rodin, Rosso used the *non-finito* effect to signify temporal sculptural qualities such as growth and emergence. As many have noted, the fully realized form is always implicit in the *non-finito*.⁹

Rosso's practice of working through the same motif in different media and over a number of years is a demonstration of his reluctance to truly "finish" a particular work. The different incarnations of Rosso's *Madame Noblet* of 1897 (pl. 135), a portrait bust in gesso, were produced over a period of thirty years. It was commissioned by Anne Loustau-Noblet and her husband, Louis Sylvain Noblet, who had met Rosso in 1896 and over time amassed a considerable collection of his works. Rosso went on to make versions in gesso, bronze, and wax on gesso. But no matter the medium, this sculpture by Rosso is uniformly obdurate in its reticence to adopt the more traditional mimetic appearance of a conventional portrait bust. Indeed, the title is the only real clue to the sitter's identity, as her face and features are barely modeled and appear to be only just emerging from the mound of matter that is left to signal her torso. It is as if the artist abandoned the sculpture only shortly after he began it, its subject still mostly subsumed by the raw material that would normally be used to fashion it.

The theme of growth and becoming is also explored in the work of the Polish artist Alina Szapocznikow, which, like Rosso's work, is often understood in terms of the fragment. As Anda Rottenberg encapsulates the artist's sculptural aesthetic: "Legs, lips, breasts, fragments of the face (as well as casts of a closed eye). The dismembered body, ever incomplete fragments extracted from the whole, is reduced to the role of gadgets left for mass consumption."¹⁰ While this is apposite, Szapocznikow's sculpture might also be discussed as part of a lineage, one that includes Rosso's work, in which inchoate material is modeled into states of becoming. As the artist stated in 1972: "I was educated as a classical sculptor. . . . For years I threw myself into studying problems of balance, volume, space, shadow and light. . . . My gesture is addressed to the human body, 'that complete erogenous zone,' to its most vague and ephemeral sensations. I want to exalt the ephemeral in the folds of our body, in the traces of our passage. Through casts of the body I try to fix the fleeting moments of life, its paradoxes and absurdity, in transparent polyester. . . . Nothing is definitive in my work."¹¹

In 1968 Szapocznikow began her series *Tumors*. Perhaps the masterpiece from this series is *Tumors Personified* of 1971 (pl. 142, fig. 2), consisting of



Fig. 2. Detail of Alina Szapocznikow (Polish, 1926–1973), *Tumors Personified*, 1971 (pl. 142)

Nauman began a series of cast-wax portrait heads of three sitters, one of whom is the person captured in *Andrew Head / Andrew Head Reversed, Nose to Nose* of 1990 (pl. 143). This version consists of two wax casts of the same head—one in blue, positioned upright with its tongue extended (the tongues, added later, are casts of the artist's own), and the other in green, placed upside down on a circular red wax base. The idea of Nauman's wax sculpture as only a partial step toward the usual bronze-casting process is notable here, as he elected to underscore the process itself by leaving the work at what would often be considered an intermediary stage, rather than trying to achieve the semblance of resolution and final form. Like Rodin and Rosso before him, Nauman made the definitively unfinished an intrinsic quality of the work.

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sixteen amorphous mounds of polyester resin, glass wool, newspaper, and gauze, each with a face emerging from the mounds of matter. As such, they represent states of metamorphosis and metastasis, serving as both a self-portrait of the artist as she succumbs to the cancer that would kill her in two years and a personification of her tumors as they spread through and ravaged her body. Indeed, when first exhibited in 1971 this work was titled *Disintegration of Personality*. Szapocznikow decided to change the title just after her second surgery for cancer, a mastectomy, in 1972.¹² Like Rosso's sculpture, this work is seemingly stopped and suspended midway through its completion; the refusal of a conclusion or a conventional sense of finish imparts a temporal aspect to it, as it appears to be in a perpetual state of becoming—a poignant fact for an artist who must have been only too aware of the fleeting nature of time.

Another take on the final form as a metaphor for the process of becoming is found in the work of Bruce Nauman, who has displayed an interest in casting the human body since the beginning of his career.¹³ In 1989



132. Auguste Rodin, *The Hand of God*, modeled ca. 1896–1902, commissioned 1906, carved ca. 1907 (p. 315)

133. Auguste Rodin, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, modeled probably before 1887, carved 1893 (p. 315)

134. Auguste Rodin, *Madame X*, modeled ca. 1907 (p. 315)



135. Medardo Rosso, *Madame Noblet*, original modeled 1897, third version made after 1914 (p. 316)

136. Medardo Rosso, *Child at the Breast*, modeled 1889, cast ca. 1910–14 (p. 316)

137. Medardo Rosso, *Ecce Puer (Behold the Child)*, first modeled 1906, plaster cast after ca. 1920 (p. 317)

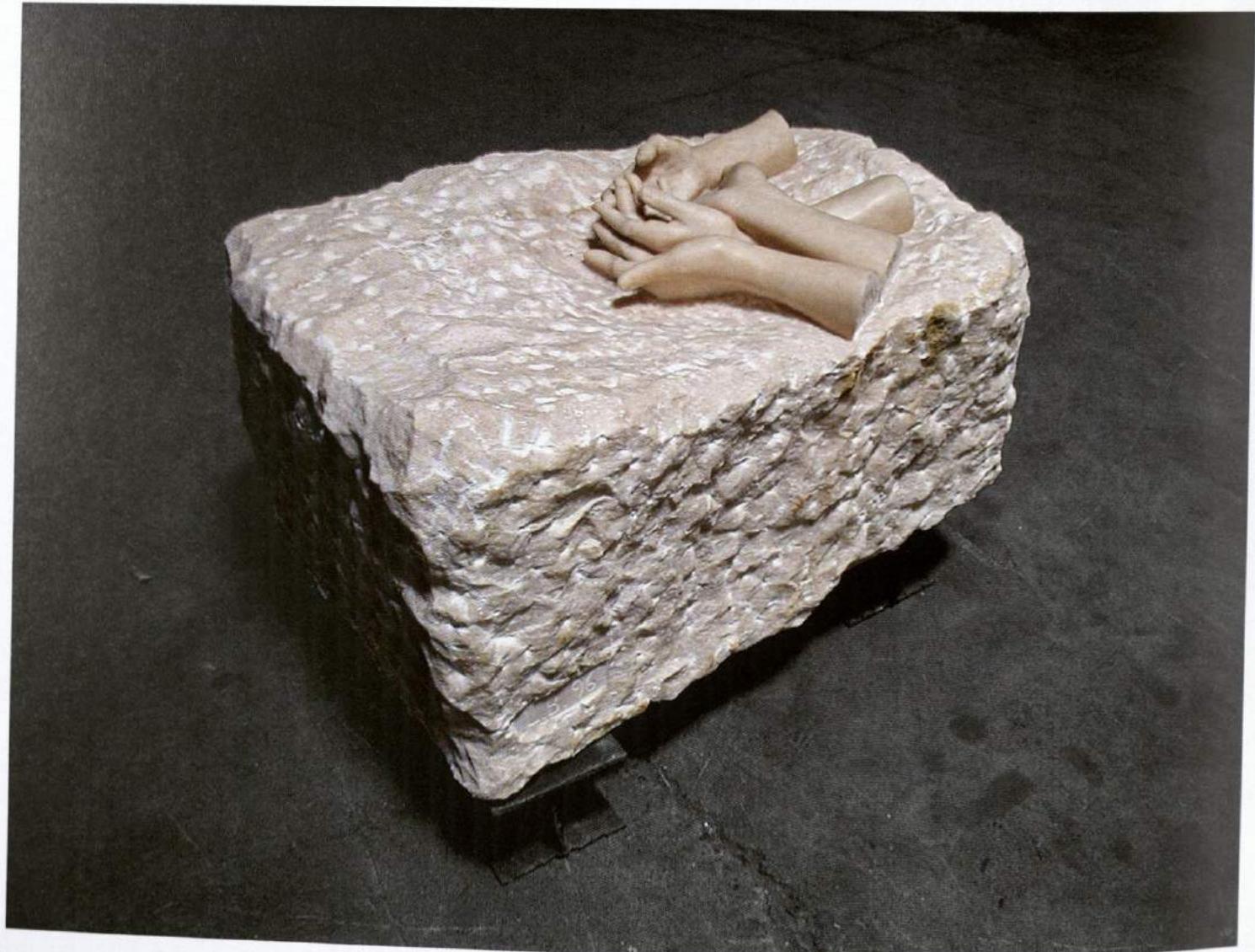


138. Medardo Rosso, Photomontage with
Medici Madonna, ca. 1900 (p. 317)

139. Anonymous copy of Johann Gregor
van der Schardt's reduction of an original
in marble by Michelangelo Buonarroti,
Medici Madonna, ca. 1900 (p. 317)



140. Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled (No. 2)*,
1996 (p. 278)



141. Bruce Nauman, *Untitled (Hand Circle)*,
1986 (p. 305)



142. Alina Szapocznikow, *Tumors*
Personified, 1971 (p. 321)



143. Bruce Nauman, *Andrew Head / Andrew Head Reversed, Nose to Nose*, 1990 (p. 305)

