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Untouchable

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fictional reality

Elizabeth Mead

**THE PHOTOGRAPH
AND ITS OBJECT**



untouchable

Michael Schreyach



Elizabeth Mead's sculpture, *Untitled Williamsburg 03* (FIG 01), is made from a single sheet of white paper, not quite folded but rolled or wrapped into a deceptively simple form and held in equilibrium by two pieces of house string tied at critical junctions. The tensile strength of the sutures prevents the flexible construction from unfurling to reveal what must be its irregular planar shape, yet does so without unnecessary force. The knots simply draw the form together, connecting remote areas of the paper and securing the overlap of its obverse and reverse sides with a stitch. The sculpture touches itself.

FIG 01

Figuratively, the knots are touches, insofar as they were produced by the artist's dexterous entwining of short lengths of string. By metonymic exchange, Mead transfers a particular quality of her activity (manipulation or handling by looping and tying) to what becomes an independent feature of the sculpture proper (its structural capacity to gather and bind itself together as a shape). The transposition of qualities from the actual or real to the virtual or fictional can move both ways, causing the exchange to swing back. As autonomous components of the work of art, the knots are *un*-touched.

The organic physiognomy of Mead's shapes yields to them a sense of biological growth—and thus a kind of anonymous volition—that deepens the emergent theme. Their tubular and conical forms are molded by overlapping segments of paper, like petals, that create the impression of florets. And in a manner analogous to the natural phototropism of plants, the sculptures seem to orient themselves toward some as yet unidentified energy source. Motivated by a force neither quite internal nor external, the string appendages stretch from the sculptures into their ambient environments. The feelers seem to reach out from their husks in an effort to consummate touch. In so doing, Mead's forms become quasi-entities, moody personages, diminutive agents, particular instances of the underlying general power of projection constitutive of living things.

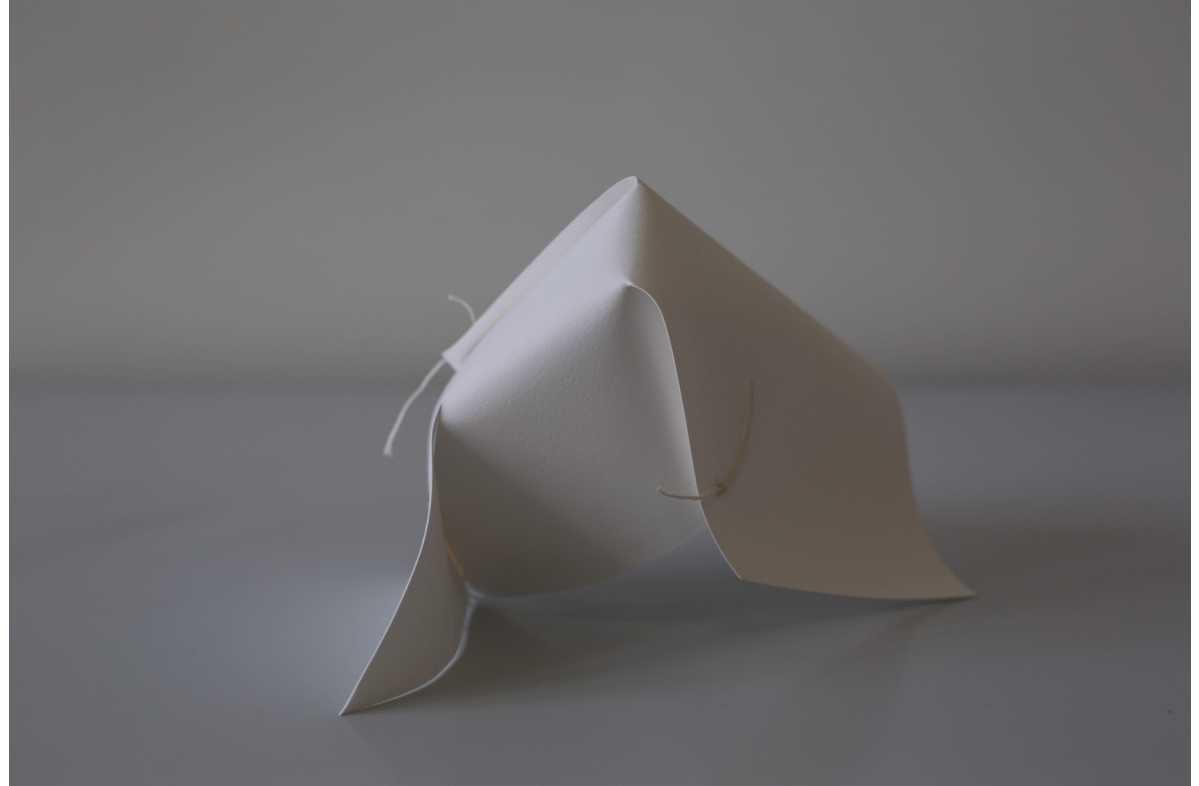


FIG 02

In the preceding paragraphs, I have purposely allowed the terms of my description to drift associatively. Indeed, the metaphorical territory onto which accounts of Mead's sculptures opens is licensed in part by the artist's statements. Of *Untitled Williamsburg 04* (FIG 02), she writes:

The very bodily gesture of the paper form that is mimicked by the upsweep of the strings animates and gives breath and life to a centered volume. The warmth of the light absorbing into the paper surface—shining here, glowing there—heightens our awareness of it as a skin-like texture and animates the tucking and stretching gestures of the paper planes.

Here, Mead attributes to the literal volume of the object the capacity to breathe, and to its constituent parts the ability to gesture and signal. Each piece has an animated countenance. Thus Mead's description figures the literal object as an embodiment of organic life. Despite its small size and plain materials, one might even attribute to *Untitled Williamsburg 04* an *auratic* presence, a judgment usually reserved for sacred objects. Although critics have often overused the term, it is useful to recall that the modern word "aura" derives from the ancient Greek and Latin words for breeze and breath, each connoting a draft or circulation of air. Mead's forms are inspired.¹

In art writing, it is uncommon to mention aura without also citing the German writer and critic Walter Benjamin, who invoked the term to describe the chiasmic effect of proximity and remoteness he associated with photographic imagery. In his 1931 essay, "A Short History of Photography," Benjamin was drawn to the camera's seemingly unlimited capacity to capture "the physiognomic aspects of the world of images, which reside in the smallest details."² But he was also attentive to the way early photographic portraits seemed to envelop their subjects within a palpable medium, a "breathy halo" of light and shadow that created something like a visual shell or cradle that "entwined" (his word) the object's individuality and duration, its physical and temporal modes of existence.³ "What is aura?" Benjamin asked. His famous answer: "A strange web of time and space: the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand."⁴

Each of Benjamin's observations—about photography's capacity to picture the physiognomic aspects of actual things and to project a sense of their remoteness or detachment despite the nearness of the image—helps us get into focus the relation of Mead's paper sculptures to the object-portraits coupled with them. Return to *Untitled Williamsburg 03* (FIG 01). Observe that the image of the sculpture in the photograph appears enlarged relative to the actual object set upon its cantilever platform. Moreover, the size of the print (about two feet wide) occupies a great-

er portion of our visual field, and thus provokes our heightened inspection. The picture, in fact, seems to offer us a view of the paper object that brings it closer to us, because the virtual image reveals physical details that otherwise escape immediate attention when concentrating on the piece in the round. (See detail, FIG 03).

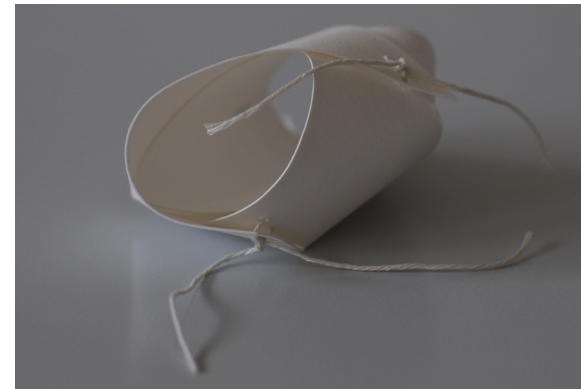


FIG 03

For instance, the image allows us to see clearly the twisting together of the string's individual strands (count them: four), which creates striated patterns of light and dark along their short lengths. We detect that the strings are tied with simple double-knots, not square ones (in other words, Mead employs no systematic pattern of fastening). We discover that the tiny holes, through which are threaded the loops that secure the overlapping planes, each have their own "physiognomic" character: Mead punctures the holes into the paper with a sharp awl instead of punching them out, which leaves Lilliputian ridges around their openings. And we become aware of other abstract qualities such as how, again in the image, the paper's thin edge serves as a contour line around the hollow of the form, as the sculpture projects itself onto the two-dimensional screen of the photographic print.⁵

Still, even as they appear close, the images of the objects in the photographs, despite the details they register, seem to exceed our grasp (in both the physical and cognitive connotations of that word). In representing an actual sculpture, near us, within the fictional world of her monochromatic picture-space, Mead transposes to a virtual register its tangible qualities, including texture, structure, and dimension. To the extent that her paper envelopes extend toward viewers on cantilever platforms, we sense them to intrude on the actual space we occupy in the gallery. But when shifted into a photograph, their felt proximity to our station diminishes by comparison. The juxtaposition of image and object calls for their comparison, sensitizing us to perceive differences in the play of light or tone across planar surfaces, or contrasts of focus and reflection.

Our experience of the reality of the object at hand, we might say, is affected by certain artificial qualities captured by the camera and introduced to that encounter, such as the depicted sculpture's alternate scale, its visual focus within a controlled depth of field, and the determinate angle of view it is given in photographic space in contrast to the variable aspects afforded to a moving viewer. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the images, in their constructed fictions, *answer* their physical models, augmenting *their* reality. Mead thus reverses the direction of contemporary prejudice: by extending to the "actual" object qualities that she has created and controlled in her "virtual" image, she transfigures both avatar and item, while simultaneously refusing to subordinate our analog sense of things to the immateriality of their digital surrogates.



FIG 04

Like her other paper sculptures, *Untitled Williamsburg 01* (FIG 04) was fabricated using heavy-weight cotton rag paper backed with a thin sheet of Dupont Archival Tyvek using a ph-neutral and acid-free glue. A piece of Tyvek resembles a smooth, translucent sheet of paper, but it is actually a synthetic material made of high-density polyethylene fibers (it is in substance plastic). The durable fabric is difficult to tear but easily cut with scissors, and one of its advantages for Mead is its capacity to amplify the surface tension of the paper and render its curves more taut. The material thus endows supple counterforce to adjacent planes, creating the impression that Mead's overlapping surfaces are *just* being held in place against the elastic strain of the paper to return to its original flatness.

Although relatively smooth, when sealed to the underlying paper, Tyvek nonetheless preserves the cotton rag's fibrous texture, albeit in muffled relief. In fact, because the planes are so closely bonded together, the physical differences between the obverse and reverse surfaces of the page are almost indistinguishable. Yet it is always the case that Mead uses the side faced with Tyvek for the "interior" of her forms. That is, she gathers or folds the sculptural shell so that the hollow volume of the shape (its "negative" space) is lined with the material. The decision results in an important effect having to do with relative degrees of luminous temperature. The synthetic fabric reflects light in a brighter, colder tone. The cotton, by contrast, yields a warmer quality. That warmth is caused in part by its more pronounced texture at a very close surface level, where angled rays encounter undulating cotton fibers that cast exceptionally shallow shadows across the plane. In other words, Mead's use of the different materials enables her to control, at very precise intervals, the tonal range of light and shadow she desires the sculpture to reflect or absorb. Obviously, the chiaroscuro tactic has a decisive impact on the formal qualities of the photographs that Mead envisions.

Those monochromatic images not only visualize objects in delicate gradations of luminosity, but also put into play a subtle dance of reflections that bear upon our perception of the composite work as a whole (sculpture *plus* photograph). Indeed, Mead carefully orchestrates the overall effects of her aggregate presentation. First, the cantilever shelf upon which a sculpture sits is topped with a one-quarter-inch aluminum plate. The body of the shelf is made of plywood, with sides covered in maple veneer. The ensemble is painted in semi-gloss white enamel.⁶ Mead sands the aluminum to a satiny level of finish that yields a mid-range sheen, which permits the sculpture to be reflected—but not mirrored—in the surface, while at the same time allowing the plate to concentrate and deflect ambient light onto the walls. To be sure, the artist considers the local reflections of light from both the platform and the paper sculpture onto adjacent surfaces in the gallery to be a component of the work (a point to which I will return momentarily). The surface supporting the sculptures in the photographs is also semi-reflective metal.⁷



FIG 05

Immediately behind the sculptural element of the composite *Untitled Williamsburg 02* (FIG 05), Mead's spotlighting casts on the gallery wall a shaded channel bracketed on either side by bright vertical striations, charged like tiny lightning strikes. They result from light deflected off the object's posterior surfaces. While Mead considers such incidents to be integral to her piece, it would be wrong to insist that these *particular* reflections and shadows are essential. In other locations, different conditions of installation and illumination will produce altered effects in the presentation of the whole. Given the unlikelihood of replicating in every possible physical setting identical patterns of shimmer and shade, we are encouraged to conclude that in any location, it must be the *general* phenomenon of "reflection" that remains significant for our interpretation of the work. But it is equally important to insist that accepting the variability of display conditions does not make the work's meaning contingent on external factors (least of all, on our "experience" of different environments). Far from it: Mead's reflections serve to delimit autonomous virtual domains in which the unique temporality of each sculpture unfolds.⁸



FIG 06

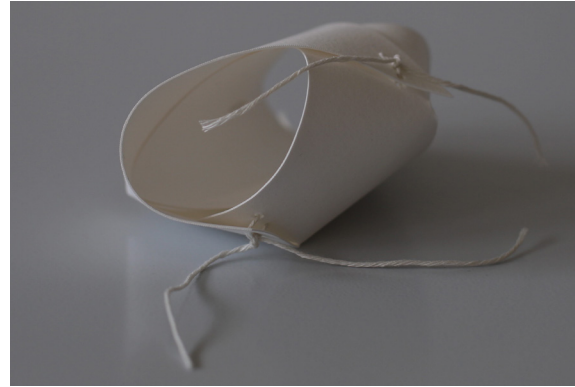


FIG 07

At the start of this essay I drew attention to the strings in *Untitled Williamsburg 03* in their metaphorical capacity to touch or feel into their environments. On its cantilever platform, the paper shell extends a lead off the front ledge. (See detail, FIG 06). The twine reaches into space, casting a slender shadow, like a drawn line, across the face of the shelf. Yet encountering no resistance and meeting no other body, the projective gesture—to attribute to the strand a degree of volition—remains an unconsummated touch. Now locate the string's twin in the photograph, where the cord extends from the sculpture's husk. (See detail, FIG 07). Inches away, the end of the tie meets a semi-reflective surface. At that point of contact, we are witness to the meeting touch of the string, its cloudy reflection, and its undulating shadow. Within the space of the photograph, in other words, Mead shows us the realization of the paper sculpture's heretofore unfulfilled gesture. That the placement of strings in the photograph matches so closely with the positions of the strings in the sculpture implies that Mead *meant* us to compare them. The drama of separation and connection implied by *Untitled Williamsburg 03* sustains a speculative hypothesis: insofar as the ensemble itself is Mead's gesture of communicating with her viewers (of touching us), it analogizes the act of interpretation itself, in which the coincidence of an artist's intent and a viewer's grasp is never guaranteed, but which proceeds asymptotically toward a consummation of meaning and understanding.

As I've pointed out, Mead considers the projection of light onto the walls of the gallery a vital component of her presentation, and that sensibility finds a precedent in her own body of work. In *Algae 02* (2009, FIGS 08 and 09), the artist arranged geometrically shaped plates of shiny copper in varying configurations on the gallery floor. When lit either by natural or artificial sources, the bur-nished surfaces deflect the rays onto the walls in patches of colored light, ever changing in profile as the ambient illumination in the gallery shifts. As re-flections, these "dematerialized" images are nonetheless literally dependent on their material copper base. (They are also figuratively tethered to that base, as if by an invisible string or line. Is it too much to see the lofty planes of light as kites sailing in the breeze?) But as viewers circumambulate the space of Mead's installation, their changing angles of approach intermittently cause the actual plates to disappear from view, to "dematerialize" in turn, momentarily camouflaged by their resemblance to the wood floorboards. Unseen, only the plate's index of light, its virtual reflection, remains "real." The chiasmic exchange—the transfer of qualities between "virtual" and "actual" and back again—draws a line of interest from *Algae 02*'s to Mead's recent work.⁹



FIG 08

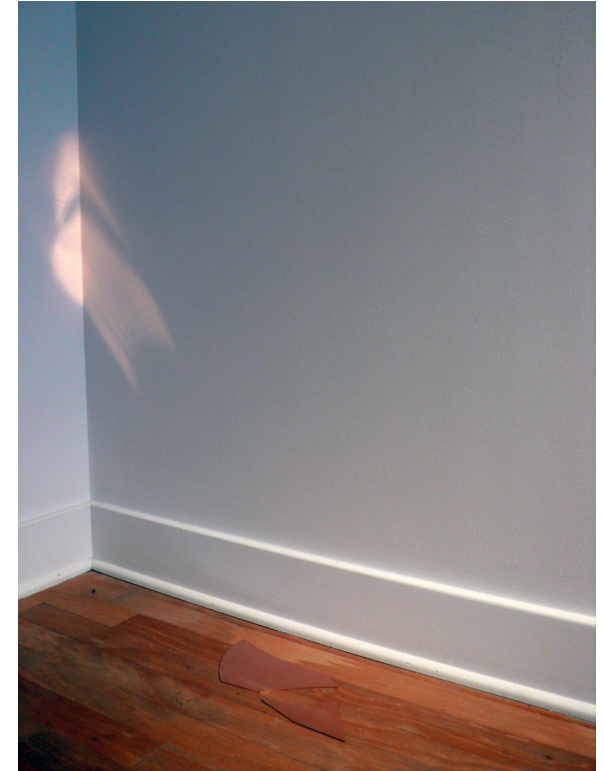


FIG 09

Mead explains the relationship between the copper plate installations and her current endeavors: "Like a memory that is so firmly fixed yet so fleeting is part of what interested me about [the copper works]. That they exist only in reflection on the wall and only for as long as the lighting lasts, but are also contingent on the physical metal plate on the floor, seems to tie them to the current paper forms and photographs."¹⁰ Here, Mead invokes reflection as literal mirroring, but also associates reflection with psychological introspection, with remembrance. The two senses of the term serve to connect or tie (her word) one body of work to the other. One kind of reflection figures the other kind, attuning us to Mead's continuing attempts to capture and represent the temporality and contingency of memory—thoughts or impressions that even without cause surface to consciousness to become the focus of attention before slipping from awareness once more.

The artist's chosen metaphors for memory, "fixed" and "fleeting," are provocative. They are precisely the kind of terms critics of early photography, including Benjamin, employed to characterize the medium's signature achievement: visualizing transient phenomena as a permanent image.¹¹ Bearing in mind *Algae 02*'s shiny metal panels, it seems relevant to mention that the most riveting early photographs to capture an image of suspended temporal experience—to transform duration into a seemingly instantaneous moment—were Daguerreotypes,

pictures exposed on light-sensitized silver-plated copper, burnished to a mirror finish. Mead's long-standing interest in metal plates as a medium—including her use of sanded and polished semi-reflective aluminum for the surfaces of her cantilever shelves—yet again draws a line of interest between her contemporary practice and photographic precedents. But beyond taking note of material similarities, there is perhaps a more compelling reason to reflect on the correspondence between Mead's current work and certain aspects of early photography.

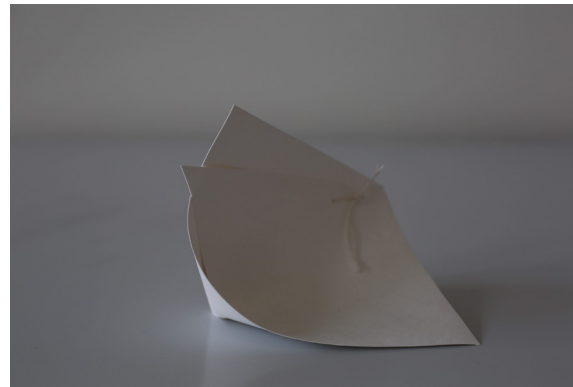


FIG 10

Photography means drawing with light. And in a way that gains significance the more we contemplate specific features of her objects and images, descriptions of Mead's work often call for terms typically reserved for drawing. In the picture

of *Untitled Williamsburg 10* (FIG 10), no proper sketch of the sculpture's appearance seems possible without portraying the image's controlled play of shade and contour, line and plane. The edge of the paper scoop oriented toward our line of sight is fixed as a brilliant white line drawn with light. (The feature is shared by the physical sculpture itself, albeit transiently: as we change our angle of view, the filament flashes in and out of existence. It is there and not there, and we are meant to understand its equivocation as part of the object's character, its unique physiognomy.) Mead explains the general presence of such drawing-like elements in her work: "The way light reflects along the edge of the paper sets a line moving in space while the sweep of the plane absorbs the light's warmth, which models its [form]."¹² In finding a way to utilize the thin edge of a piece of paper to create a drawn line, Mead achieves at least two remarkable effects. First, she puts into use and thus makes available to "drawing" the exact dimension of the paper that, in conventional practice, is subordinated to the laterally expansive planes of the page. And second, she demonstrates that the "virtual" image harbors qualities that, once isolated, guide our perception of the "actual" object, rendering its particularity all the more evident.

It begins to seem almost appropriate to think of Mead's composite works—maybe even her entire body of work—as "drawings" of a sort, perhaps even as constituting a new category of planar

figuration. A reaching analogy: Mead's paper sculptures are photo-*graphic* like a plant is photo-*tropic*: just as the sprout or blossom is automatically drawn toward the sun, Mead's forms seem to draw themselves out of the paper pages from which they derive and which are their material support. Although made adroitly by refined procedures of gluing, cutting, handling, and tying, the fictional reality Mead creates ultimately excludes—however paradoxical it may sound—the creator. The existence of these objects is thus rendered dually proximate yet remote.

Above, I attributed to the Daguerreotype process the capacity to "transform duration into a *seemingly* instantaneous moment." My choice of seemingly was deliberate, for the practice initially required relatively long exposure times for the iodized silver plate to register the intensity of light necessary to fix a fleeting image. Moreover, the technical limitations of the first plates—their lower sensitivity to illumination—not only required prolonged exposure, but furthermore demanded that the model or subject of the picture remain as stationary as possible for its duration. Benjamin's evaluation of the consequences of these dual constraints has become classic: in early photography, "The procedure itself caused the models to live, not *out of* the instant, but *into* it; during the long exposure, they grew, as it were, into the image."¹³ The Daguerreotype's synthesis of temporal limitation (the instant of the image) with temporal allowance (the ex-

tent of the model) produces an impression simultaneously of a "strange web of time and space": of immediacy and longevity, of proximity and distance.

I suspect that for Mead (as for Benjamin) living "out of" an instant would be deemed a diminished form of temporal experience in comparison to growing "into" it. The first expression suggests a form of exile: a radical arrest or even cancellation of temporality as the camera captures and isolates a fraction of a second within the continuum of duration. Removed or taken out of the world, the subject exists only as cliché.¹⁴ Growing "into" the image, by contrast, suggests a form of coincidence: the subject fulfills its existence by living *through* time (not out of it). The keyword "aura" names the quality of a subject permeated and absorbed by time. And for Benjamin, that absorption was revealed especially in the human countenance, its unique physiognomy. Analogously, in their subtle monochromatic tonality, the photographs of Mead's distinctly shaped sculptures seem patiently to anticipate the movement of the light source which makes them visible. Her pictures produce an effect of temporal delay, but not temporal annulment. Their subjects wait and persist.

Aura, like a simple knot, ties together the model and the image, the enduring and the momentary, the distant and the close, the fictional and the real. Aura means that the still image is not inanimate. We might even say that its binding effect subtends such divisions themselves, overcoming the antagonism of their presumed oppositions. Mead's ensembles thus establish an unlikely treaty between ostensibly divergent categories, rendering the untouchable palpable.

¹ The root and substance of the observation is credited to Richard Schiff, "Breath of Modernism (Metonymic Drift)," in *In Visible Touch: Modernism and Masculinity*, ed. T. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 184–213; at 185.

² Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography" [1931], in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 199–216; at 203. Benjamin's neologism for the realm of heretofore unseen phenomena revealed by the camera was the "optical unconscious" (203). Coincidentally—in light of my previous remarks on phototropism—Benjamin's chief example to illustrate such visual detail was the work of Karl Blossfeldt, whose close-up pictures of flowers and sprouts in *Urformen der Kunst* (Berlin: 1930) reveal what appear to be permanent monumental structures.

³ Ibid., 207 and 209. "Entwined" translates Benjamin's original German phrase, "eng verschränkt," which could be given as "closely intertwined." The verb *verschränken* also means "to fold," specifically the arms or legs, an operation obviously not unrelated to the physiognomic characteristics of Mead's work. See Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," in *Gesammelte Schriften: Band II: n.1 Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge*, ed. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 368–85; at 379.

⁴ Ibid., 209. An alternate phrasing ap-

pears in Benjamin's famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [1935–39], in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–51: "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be" (222).

⁵ Mead patiently produces such effects. Because she chooses to photograph her sculptures in natural light, she must sometimes wait for the precise the conditions of illumination under which the paper's edges will appear as object's contour "lines" in her image. This is to invert our usual understanding of contour as an opaque graphic mark on a surface. But the technique also prompts us to recall an original theorization of *photo-graphy* as an art of drawing lines with light.

⁶ Although she does not produce them by hand, the frames of the photographs are also made of white finished wood. The choice establishes a material connection between the frame and the shelf, yielding the impression that they are of a similar class. And insofar as both frame and shelf are literal supports for displaying either the picture or the sculpture, they are integral components of the work, not simply presentational accessories.

⁷ In fact, it is the white enamel surface of a set of standard flat files in the artist's studio. This, too, was not simply an expedient but rather a strategic choice: Mead tested numerous horizontal surfaces as

possibilities for both shelf and picture.

⁸ The existence of variable installation conditions and configurations does raise an interpretive challenge. Mead's aggregate objects test our capacity to discriminate the limits the work sets to our actual experience from the meaning the work holds. So, for instance, while it might seem right to say that the reflection of light onto the walls of the gallery is significant, it does not seem true to claim that a viewer's reflection in the glass pane of the photograph is. Coming to understand the relationship between contingency and control—between experience and intent—in Mead's work is essential to our efforts to interpret her meaning. Charles Palermo has put the issue precisely: the effects of Mead's work, he writes, "pits one's literal experience, one's sense of what one sees, against provisional interpretations, one's sense of what or how one is *meant* to see. All of this is to question the givenness of the work of art—to refuse the identity between the work [of art] and the object and to insist in various ways that the task of seeing the work is a matter of understanding what has been proposed, not of experiencing what is given." See Palermo, "Elizabeth Mead's *Signatures*," (2015): n.p., at <https://elizabethmead.com/essay>.

⁹ It is highly revealing that in her documentation of *Algae*, Mead designates her medium as "copper and reflection." The pointed inclusion of "reflection" suggests that she considers *immaterial* light

