

Bohnen's Moments

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That moment you don't notice could change everything. —Blythe Bohnen

Blythe Bohnen has spent decades investigating small, seemingly insignificant acts that compose the basis for her works of art. The primary methods she has used to engage directly and critically with her own creative acts are drawing and photography, and these methods sometimes combine in forms of self-inquiry akin to portraiture, for which bodily movements—whether mark making, gesturing, or standing fairly still—are points of departure for, and apotheoses of, broad concerns with locating herself in the world. While Bohnen employs a set of contemporary artistic practices adjacent to and clearly rhyming with conceptual art of the 1960s, the systematic nature of her wide-ranging questions about the qualities of human behaviors, aesthetic production, and modes of documentation may be productively compared with the early twentieth-century efforts of the Italian brothers Anton Giulio and Arturo Bragaglia, who worked in Italian futurism and spirit photography but who were influenced by nineteenth-century scientific positivists, especially Étienne-Jules Marey and Angelo Mosso. To appreciate some of the layered associations in Bohnen's decades-long interest in body movement analysis, which extends across various bodies of work, it can be useful to review historical cases of scientific analysis (with photography and other types of instrumentation) before turning to specific resonances between her works and those of the Bragaglia brothers. In the course of this interpretation, gesture functions as a dominant theme to be supplemented by issues of performative activities or behaviors, and then it will be considered as part

of an exploratory assessment concerning analyzing and intervening in unconscious habits.

By noting that “the mind is such a different instrument of perception from the camera,”¹ Bohnen revisits a fundamental premise of nineteenth-century scientific research on human subjects, in which certain devices can supplement the fallible human observer. Indeed, the human mind, which may not be able or inclined to disclose its innermost processes, can be investigated through careful, at times technologically advanced, observations of the body's physical activities. For instance, French physiologist Marey stated, “When the eye ceases to see, the ear to hear, touch to feel, or indeed when our senses give deceptive appearances, these instruments are like new senses of astonishing precision.”² His chronophotographic imagery attests to a precise but unfamiliar approach to viewing the human body in motion. Also, when researching human emotions, the Italian physiologist and criminologist Mosso closely examined vasomotor responses to document those physical signs and conditions through which the interior states of his experimental subjects might be inferred, and such tangible evidence of the “movements of the soul” used inscriptive devices that would eventually lead to lie detection instruments and techniques (fig. 1). Such tools used to record automatically certain aspects of human interiority also fueled interest in revealing the inner workings of the creative mind—through automatic writing experiments, such as those conducted by American philosopher and psychologist William James and his young graduate student Gertrude Stein, who later applied such techniques to her own experimental literary style.³

The idea of accessing hidden recesses of the human psyche was not only a deeply influential scientific supposition but also a historically important artistic and sociological concern. By the beginning of the twentieth century, automatism was a broad term covering a range of physiological, sociological, psychological, and sociocultural phenomena—the rigorous examination of which



Fig. 1: Photographer unknown, *Angelo Mosso con lo pneumografo*, end of nineteenth century. Photographic glass plate. Courtesy of Marco Galloni and the Scientific and Technological Archives of the University of Turin.

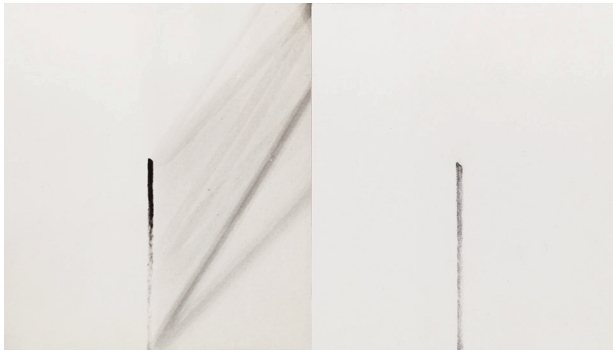


Fig. 2: Blythe Bohnen, *Factum I: One Vertical Motion Recorded by Charcoal-Stick and Camera Open at End of Motion*, 1968. Gelatin silver print and graphite on paper.

brought valuable contributions to knowledge about what it means (or has meant) to be human.⁴

Bohnen's interest in complex instrumentation dates to her time at college, when she photographed herself making drawings underwater. Since her experimental setup included drawing implements and surfaces, a camera and lighting kit, and a water tank, the resulting visual works document the various physical and optical effects generated by, and intrinsically related to, the same artistically inspired act. She later noted, "While photographing the disturbance of the plane by drawing in water, I had faced the inevitability of getting the unwanted shadows and instrument as part of the image."⁵ Her expanded concept of mark making thus necessarily acknowledged additional sources of data, not unlike the way a scientist will include all of the relevant inputs or conditions (as givens) with a set of experimental data. Later, she applied this expanded concept of artistic production to creating "visual equivalents" between her drawn lines and photographs of making those same lines, both of which capture parallel indexes of a given act of drawing (fig. 2). Again, the excess data—for instance, the shadows cast onto a drawing surface—shaped her analysis: "If one desired to retain forever that one moment,

they had to be included."⁶ Extrapolating further, she concluded that any honest analysis (based on accepting any underlying uncertainty about the results) requires including the technical conditions of observation:

I was studying Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which is not uncertain, but merely points out our dependence on the instrument of measurement and its effect on what we can know. Knowledge and the instrument of measurement are bound together.⁷

This Conceptualist tendency endemic to her method of drawing—to record the conditions of an unfolding activity—has offered a timely meditation on and rethinking of a range of automatic image-making techniques, such as those pioneered by the Surrealists and the Abstract Expressionists respectively, which often appear in her working notes.⁸

Bohnen's commitment to analyzing her own creative and critical activities was not limited to only her mark making activities but also included idiosyncratic gestures before the camera when figuring as her own experimental test subject. Often her camera was systematically trained on herself while following predetermined sets of instructions for making motions, though without precluding improvisation entirely (fig. 3).⁹ Alongside the time-motion analysis in physiological and psychophysiological contexts, as mentioned, her overarching visual and conceptual project shares features of the research conducted over a century ago by the Bragaglia brothers, whose instructive historical case integrated a range of scientific, technical, aesthetic, and spiritualist aims. In particular, gesture was a source of individual and collective patterns of movement for the Italian futurists, who would, however, be expelled in 1913 due to a dispute over the role of photography in



Fig. 3: Blythe Bohnen, *Self-Portrait: Vertical, Horizontal Motion Small*, 1974. Gelatin silver print.

the visual arts.¹⁰ Anton Giulio wrote, "We want to render, graphically, the *perpetual motion* in the perpetuity of a *given* gesture."¹¹ Such interest in capturing the "dynamic sensation" of a subject's gestures included restaging activities in controlled settings.¹² Since the resulting imagery departed from visual conventions of the era, they became aficionados of unfamiliar or unknown visual qualities relating to bodily and psychic processes: "We study the monstrous beauty of a gesture."¹³ Suggesting invisible forces moving in and through the human mind and body, their semi-abstracted figurative language had the benefit of denoting specific types of gesture while at once connoting expressive or even spiritual forces motivating those activities. For the Bragaglias, any specific trajectories provided a range of spatiotemporal signatures directly analogous to a person's experience in the world. Their research resembles Bohnen's interest in an expressive range of



Fig. 4: Anton Giulio Bragaglia and Arturo Bragaglia, *Un Gesto del Capo* (*The Gesture of a Head*), 1911. Gelatin silver print. © 2022 Artists Rights Society, New York / SIAE, Rome. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

gestures, which might be, at times, generalized across multiple, similar instances or, conversely, considered highly individualized cases. According to her, she developing the dual-recording process as a means for capturing what mental processes led up to the activity and what could otherwise be lost in the final drawing, adding: "My art materializes these invisible mental projections."¹⁴ Elsewhere, she notes how she wants to "try to capture that moment when gesture becomes figure." Thus, her imagery functions as a mode of translating underlying motive, or cause, into materiality.

In this sense, if any given figure necessitates a ground to be discerned, then bodily movement, for her, provides the essential ground from which the significance of any action presents itself, similar to when Anton Giulio described photodynamism as being able to deduce a person's personality from particular tics, unconscious gestures, or intentional acts.¹⁵

A productive quality demonstrated by both Bohnen and the Bragaglia brothers is blurred bodily motion—as recorded by means of a stationary camera. By rejecting the arbitrariness of a photographic instant, which Anton Giulio termed "the most bestial error of the snapshot," the brothers expanded the temporality of "still" photography to include interconnected moments directly equated with the hidden depths (or soul) of a model.¹⁶ Unlike film motion, which merely reproduced everyday illusions, blurred action in the resulting images permitted a type of psycho-physical calligraphy to emerge, approximating the same invisible forces of the soul purportedly preserved by the scientific positivists. As one exemplary image that addresses indiscernible forces, *Un Gesto del Capo* (*The Gesture of a Head*), 1911 (fig. 4) carries a faint imprint of Anton Giulio himself, which hovers in a darkened room, which is directly analogized to the murky depths of his psychic interior: partially identifiable features, akin to passing fears or desires, are submerged beneath an overexposed light deposit that abruptly trails off into the surrounding void. Another individualizing technique—termed *polyphysiognomic portrait*—was meant to reveal the personality of a person, as with the futurist artist Umberto Boccioni (fig. 5), and the superimposed images of his rotating head intentionally introduced "visual vertigo" into the concept of photographically preserving his semblance.¹⁷ These visual signatures of specific activities and people offer an aesthetic context for comparing

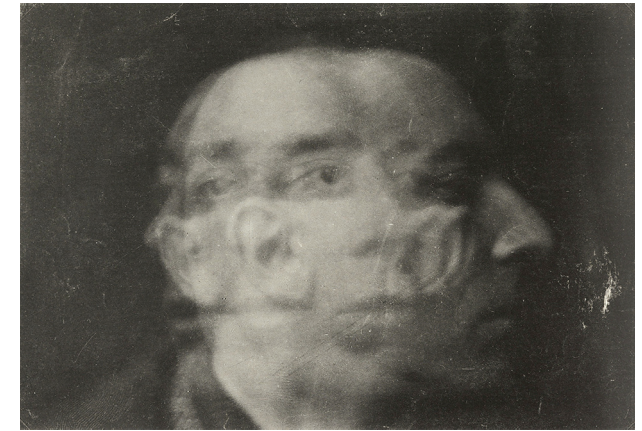


Fig. 5: Anton Giulio and Arturo Bragaglia, *Polyphysiognomic Portrait of Umberto Boccioni*, ca. 1912–13. Black-and-white photograph. © 2022 Artists Rights Society, New York / SIAE, Rome

and contrasting types of behavior, and they follow from a similar impulse to understand human processes as the analytical context of scientific experimentation.

When describing in her working notes her own automatic techniques for recording gestures, Bohnen productively oscillates between making scientific and artistic claims: "I explore mark making by defining the possibilities, defining and categorizing the alternatives. My physical hand motion to develop a vocab[ul]ary of forms; setting up [and] defining the limiting conditions for motion."¹⁸ Although pioneered in scientific milieus, methodological precision can operate equally well in creative contexts. Next to her systematic approach, she also acknowledges the mysterious, or not fully rationalizable, dimensions of gestures, which "have been used as embodiments of human intuition, sensibility, error, often iconographically opposed to mechanical images or processes."¹⁹ Akin to the Bragaglias' "monstrous beauty" that inhabits the murky conceptual terrain between automatic tools and expressive means, Bohnen notes: "I am interested in being deliberate about this last outpost of human



Fig. 6: Blythe Bohnen. Left: *Self-Portrait: Horizontal Motion, Medium*, 1974. Gelatin silver print. Right: *Self-Portrait: Horizontal, Vertical Motion, Large*, 1974. Gelatin silver print.

sensibility.”²⁰ For her, rigorous examination of this “last outpost” underscores how expressive forces move from hidden, psychic interiors into shared visible domains—at times quite publicly and profoundly. Recalling a pivotal experience at the Met in New York in the 1960s, she mentions watching the subtle, slowed-down activity of the dancer Merce Cunningham, whereby the extended temporality of a simple gesture engendered an adjacent mode of reception.²¹ When subsequently reducing, isolating, and restricting her psycho-physical frame of reference, Bohnen similarly reframed her own artistic activities as discrete acts: “I’m trying to get down to some basic unit and then build up from there.”²² In imagery made by following rules established prior to making a given movement, the artist brought a Zen-like focus to “several equal realities of that movement” and to “the layered reality of each moment.”²³ Her restricted scope has yielded profuse effects of a complex mind-body system—as individual acts existing in the world and resonating across various material, psychic, and sociohistorical contexts.

In the photographic series *Factum*, Bohnen frames a broad range of self-portraits in which her own image has been revealed or distorted by her bodily (and psychic) movements (fig. 6). Yet, similar to the Bragaglias’ imagery, the idea of photographic resemblance takes on divergent meanings:

Through this systematic and simple process, I can become a man or a woman, or a series of different human characters. Each face is created from an image of my face, but every face is quite different from my face. I can be standing beside my portrait, but nobody can recognize the subject (myself).²⁴

Bohnen’s series recalls how Anton Giulio Bragaglia described the figure of the artist as an “ultra-sensitive being,” who translates “one hundred voices” and “one hundred visions” into material forms by accessing the imagination.²⁵ Her complex recalibration of body and recording medium similarly permits an expanded range of emotive trajectories to blossom and grow. Elsewhere, she notes, “They could certainly be considered images reflecting different aspects of my personality.”²⁶ However, unlike artists such as Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura, who playact a range of different personae *in situ*, Bohnen uses the simplicity of an intentionally uncluttered setup to isolate the basic units of identification, which traverse, and even escape from, her reductive staging. As a type of spiritual medium for receiving and transmitting gestural vitality, Bohnen invites new inflections of the underlying formal vocabulary to manifest in and through her psychophysiological efforts.

In a series of paired photographs and drawings, Bohnen has used the same double recording procedure but now photographically captures the movement of her head, while she is making a particular mark on paper—each material element indexing another dimension of a specific act (fig. 7). These meditations on the economy and discipline of mark making emphasize how a single, psychophysical act radiates outward as a set of facts that can support innumerable frames of reference, based on such categories as the type or qualities of activity, location, state of mind, motive,



Fig. 7: Blythe Bohnen, *Self-Portrait, Circular Motion, Left, Small*, 1973. Diptych; watercolor, graphite and gelatin silver print.

etc. Reflected in and through this haiku-like structure of two visual mediums, the pairs of images drop like pebbles into the pond of observable reality; her expressive interior emerges moment by moment from her waking consciousness and propagates material and immaterial effects toward the distant shores of personal, cultural, and historical memories. Unlike the vexed relationship to water that tormented the Greek mythological figures of Narcissus and Tantalus respectively, Bohnen immerses herself in the clearer waters of self-awareness, so that each discrete act can trace its own path through adjacent systems of meaning—psychic, sociological, and aesthetic—as a piece of evidence seeking its own proper explanation.

While Bohnen’s works uncover myriad visual, psychic, emotive, and physiological associations within her psychic interior, these activities also comprise a sophisticated method for investigating complex internal processes themselves. She has said: “The task I set my art...is to reveal these mental processes and to indicate the presence of this behavior.”²⁷ By focusing on and revealing certain behaviors, thus bridging interior and exterior, she seeks to intervene in them as well. No longer simply limited to offering a historical



Fig. 8: Blythe Bohnen, *Self-Portrait: Horizontal Elliptical Motion*, Small, 1974. Gelatin silver print.

analogy for analyzing psychic drives—akin to Freud’s technique for understanding repressed psychic material, relating to a subject’s responses to specific social or psychic situations—Bohnen offers a powerful analogy for more recent cognitive methods that can correct or alter behaviors. One influential model for framing this kind of therapeutic intervention, developed by psychologist Aaron Beck, presupposes that, whether consciously or not, individuals employ specific mental and emotional schema for processing experiential stimuli in specific situations, which result in their lived responses or symptoms.²⁸ Awareness of the core schema within a person’s psyche (which may pertain to a wider population) permits being able to adjust one’s responses, whether or not they have obviously debilitating effects. For Bohnen, documenting her own mark making practices has, for instance, helped her appreciate that quite similar drawings or images might originate from different kinds of action.²⁹ Later applying this same lesson about her images and creative process to her thinking, she seems to confirm an important basic premise

for this therapeutic interpretation: “Not to learn a response, but to respond differently to the same stimulus.”³⁰ By incorporating photographic documentation into her creative practices, she makes informed decisions about how she wishes to act, and she adjusts accordingly.

Elsewhere, when detailing the specific process used to make Polaroids of herself in motion—works in which she makes “drawings” with the light reflected from her eyes (fig. 8)—she describes using her preliminary visual results to rethink how to construct a given image:

Studying that position would show me exactly what I had done. That was often a revelation, since I discovered many discrepancies between what my body told me I was doing and what the film said I had done. I had to retain the body memory of one attempt to adjust it for the next attempt.³¹

Based on her own form of behavioral modification, she changed her micromovements in order to refine her imagery. As her sensitivity to her own movements increased, such as those in the span of a few seconds or even a fraction of a second, she developed an intuitive response to this unfolding temporality: “I have this gut sense of the enormity of what can happen in one second. That moment you don’t notice could change everything. I feel like we swim in the medium of time.”³² Yet, her process has acclimated her not only to inhabiting time, but also to altering her relation to it:

It carries us along, yet we also can direct ourselves...Each thought may be momentary, but we can constantly reassert them, and get the sensation of stability even if it is made up of incessant returns.³³

Modifying internal patterns constitutes another medium in its own right, which, for her, becomes a means for developing a more sensitive relation to the world. As captured in her vibrant works, Bohnen’s moments reveal a sense of how expressive forces pass through her mind and body in the process of entering into, and resounding within, the world. Following her lead, viewers can observe how her interior mind-body system reaches out to touch the world and how, in turn, the world and the viewers in it reach back—each learning from and adjusting to the other.

In this sense, Bohnen’s subtle interventions in her own psychic and emotive processes can assist with unfolding psychosocial and historical processes as well. She demonstrates that individuals—as the basic units of societies—can also decide to correct their own behaviors, once they are equipped with an awareness of the past, even and especially when it continues in the present. On a few occasions, the psychologist Sigmund Freud likened psychoanalysis to archaeology, during which buried psychic material can be excavated, evaluated, and perhaps even treated.³⁴ In one text, he noted, “Nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest.” For him, the past remains alive in the unconscious. By permitting privileged access to the interior of certain creative acts, Bohnen’s careful introspection demonstrates that subtle changes to actual, material conditions can yield valuable results. Through rigorous excavation of her own thoughts and behaviors, she unearths ample material, and her artistic contribution may hinge on this innovative mode of reckoning with any lingering symptoms of an outdated but ever-present past.³⁵ She might even inspire a broader search for those habits in need of revision. Perhaps it is fitting that, alongside an interest in futurism and spiritualism, Anton Giulio Bragaglia

maintained a passion for archaeology, which led some futurists to describe him facetiously as “the futurist archaeologist.”³⁶ But, at the same time that the Bragaglia brothers resisted classical aesthetic traditions, they embraced an uncommon awareness of the invisible psychosocial forces shaping their world at the turn of the twentieth century, and they accumulated valuable evidence to suggest that new ways of making images were directly related to new ways of living.³⁷ In a similar vein, Bohnen’s experimental efforts at the end of the twentieth century to investigate complex recalibrations of mind, body, apparatus, and image—along with the philosophical, materialist, and spiritual associations they trigger—carry a similar sense of reimagined vitality. By documenting with astonishing precision her own expressive mark making, she seems to follow to the letter one particularly ambitious artistic aim, which appears in her written notes: “the creation of new visual life.”³⁸ To do this, she has invented a method for making small but significant adjustments to locating herself in the world.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Blythe Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 2 Étienne-Jules Marey, *La méthode graphique dans les sciences expérimentales et particulièrement en physiologie et en médecine* (Paris: G. Masson, 1878), 108.
- 3 Leon M. Solomons and Gertrude E. Stein, “Normal Motor Automatism,” *Psychological Review* 3 (September 1896): 492–512, and Gertrude E. Stein, “Cultivated Motor Automatism: A Study of Character in its Relation to Attention,” *Psychological Review* 5 (May 1898): 295–306.
- 4 Among a vast literature on historical types of automatism, see Pierre Janet, *L’automatisme psychologique* (1889); Bernard Bosanquet, “Social Automatism and the Imitation Theory” (1899); and André Breton, “The Automatic Message” (1933).
- 5 Blythe Bohnen, letter to Elizabeth Sussman.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 As discussed in Bohnen’s notes, the Surrealists mined the psychic unconscious for multiple, at times unintended, symbolic associations, while the Abstract Expressionists, who made indexes of forms freed from any directly referential content, remained mired in emotional struggle, according to her. See Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 9 The possibility for improvisation in her work is cited in A. M. Fischer, “The Graphite Pencil in Relationship with the Camera: Works by the American Blythe Bohnen for *documenta 6*,” *Kunstmagazin* 4 (1977): n.p.
- 10 The Bragaglias’ expulsion arrived in the form of a brief announcement in the main futurist journal at the time. See Umberto Boccioni et al., “Avviso,” *Lacerba* 1, no. 19 (October 1, 1913): 211.
- 11 Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Fotodinamismo futurista* (1913, repr. 1980), 15. Author’s translation; emphasis in the original.
- 12 Regarding “dynamic sensation,” Anton Giulio states: “The gesture is to us a pure dynamic sensation and being this, nothing else than the effect produced on our sensibility by its trajectory, we are able to make one feel the dynamic sensation of the gesture and we are able to reach this aim.” Ibid., 25.
- 13 Ibid., 42.
- 14 Blythe Bohnen, “Blythe Bohnen,” in *Aphoto* (Milan: Studio Marconi, November 1977), 45.
- 15 Bragaglia, *Fotodinamismo futurista*, 41.
- 16 Ibid., 18.
- 17 Anton Giulio referred to their own photodynamic works as inspiring “visual vertigo.” Ibid., 39.
- 18 Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 19 Blythe Bohnen, artist’s statement for exhibition *Matrix 13*, Wadsworth Atheneum, November–December 1975.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Blythe Bohnen, “Excerpts from Interview by Gail Livingston,” unpublished self-interview, 6.
- 22 Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 23 On “equal realities,” see Bohnen, unpublished notes; on “layered reality,” see Bohnen, “Interview by Gail Livingston,” 13.
- 24 Blythe Bohnen, quoted in Yoichi Kimura, “Drawing of the Eyes,” *Bijutsu Techo* 9 (1984), 2, trans. Misako Onose (2002).

- 25 Bragaglia, *Fotodinamismo futurista*, 18.
- 26 Bohnen, “Interview by Gail Livingston,” 7.
- 27 Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 28 Aaron Beck, “Beyond Belief: A Theory of Modes, Personality, and Psychopathology,” in *Frontiers of Cognitive Therapy*, ed. Paul M. Salkovskis (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 1–23.
- 29 When noting that critics had ascribed specific motions to the making of her drawings, Bohnen responded: “In one series of drawing/ photographs, several forms that look identical in the drawing can be seen to have been created in very different ways....Without a photographic record of the moment of making, such attempts to speak of the working process are pure fantasy and should be considered as such.” Blythe Bohnen, “Blythe Bohnen,” in *Aphoto* (Milan: Studio Marconi, November 1977), 45–46.
- 30 Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 31 Bohnen, “Interview by Gail Livingston,” 11.
- 32 Ibid.,
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 A reference to archaeological ruins extends throughout Freud’s 1907 essay “Delusion and Dreams in Jensen’s *Gradiva*,” in Freud, *Psychological Writings and Letters* (1995), 193–265. Another reference to Roman ruins can be found in Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (2005), 34.
- 35 The art critic Lawrence Alloway also used an archaeological analogy to describe Bohnen’s process of washing away parts of her painted strokes before they had dried. Lawrence Alloway, “Blythe Bohnen,” *Artforum* 15, no. 3 (November 1976): 49.
- 36 Anton Giulio Bragaglia, “La Stirpe Bragagliesca,” *L’Osservatore politico letterario* 6 (1965): 59.
- 37 At one point, Anton Giulio summarized the relation between their imagery and the modern world: “We want to remember the most vibrant sensation of the deep expression of a reality.” Bragaglia, *Fotodinamismo futurista*, 16–17.
- 38 Bohnen, unpublished notes.