VISIBILITY OF SCULPTED MATTER AND FORM:
MICHELANGELO'S *RONDANINI PIETÀ* AND THE ONTOLOGICAL NATURE OF
SCULPTURE

by

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ABSTRACT

The *Rondanini Pietà* (1552-1564) engages the viewer in an embodied and temporal process of perceiving the becomings of sculpted form—rough and smooth surfaces, indentations, fissures and contours—enfolded in the material and physical qualities of the marble block and its flesh-like surface. Emphasizing the process of creating the work, a multitude of chisel marks animate sculpted matter and prolong the eventual pausing of the viewer's eyes. The materiality of the stone urges the viewer to move around to perceive the sculpture as it becomes transfigured anew through the continuous morphing of the facial and bodily features of its two figures: Christ and the Virgin. Deterring the comprehensibility of the subject matter, the enfolding of matter and form, conceptualized as the *infinito*, calls attention to the very rhetorical and ontological nature of the work *as* sculpture.

Kept in private collections for several centuries*,* the *Rondanini Pietà* is an uncommissioned sculpture considered to be the last work by Michelangelo Bounarroti. To interpret this Pietà, scholars have utilized established biographical, iconographic, and chronological approaches to the artist's oeuvre. In 1934, Charles de Tolnay published the first modern study of the work, interpreting it as a testament of the artist's religiosity—an interpretation that dominates the scholarship. Focusing primarily on a discussion of the *Rondanini Pietà*, this thesis introduces a concept of the *infinito* and with it a theoretical framework to expose the overdetermined nature of this scholarship. Judging the work to be either finished or unfinished (*finito* or *non-finito*) scholars rehearse the Cartesian dichotomy of *res extensa* and *res cogitans,* segregating matter from form and denying sculpture its ontological quality.

In order to understand what comes prior to the processes of description, interpretation and contextualization, what is at stake is to rethink how we approach sculpture as a medium that has specific physical and material characteristics that determine its rhetorical potential. Making the viewer part of how sculpture works to make temporally visible the becomings of form, the concept of the *infinito* challenges us to reflect upon the methodologies used in the study of sculpture produced in the period.

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Sa баку Љубицу, мог анђела чувара
(For grandma Ljubica, my guardian angel)

Introduction: The *Rondanini Pietà* and the *Infinito*

The sculpted form of the *Rondanini Pietà* (1552-1564), considered to be Michelangelo's last work, is defined by an intricate blending of two bodies (Fig. 1). As if pulled by gravity, the thin body of Christ seems to be slipping out of the confines of the Carrara marble, while the figure of the Virgin bends towards his vaguely delineated form, only to blend into it. The roughly sculpted forms are animated through an incessant appearance of chisel marks on the surface of the stone (Fig. 2-5). When seen from diverse angles, the faces, bodies, limbs and musculature of the two figures are transformed into carved indentations, rough and smooth surfaces, deep grooves, forceful slashes, physical fissures, and deep-set contours. The palpable and temporal nature of these transformations invite the viewer to perceive the *infinito* as it folds into the material of the marble the past and present phases of sculpting, thus, enveloping the past and the future moments in time, into the present—'now' of the viewer.

By suspending the artistic process, the flesh-like surface of the stone in the *Rondanini Pietà* draws the viewer's attention to both, the physical nature of the work *as* sculpture, and the corporeal nature of its subject matter. Described as *infinito*, this artistic process, I argue, is not a state of completeness or incompleteness (*finito* or *non-finito*), but a crucial feature of how the sculpted forms, contours and surfaces forestall any immediate comprehension of its subject matter—the body of Christ. This deterring function of the *infinito* suspends the present of the viewer into a constant flux of temporal moments where past and future become enfolded into the present, thus, binding the matter and form of the marble. This binding in turn, implores the viewer to observe the material and tactile three-dimensionality of the sculpted medium. Importantly, the term *infinito*—countering scholarly insistence on using *non-finito* either as a theoretical or aesthetic concept—serves as a way of critiquing established methodological frameworks utilized to interpret the *Rondanini Pietà* while simultaneously introducing a way to discuss the relational dependency of sculpted form and matter. The concept of *infinito* is part of a theoretical framework that is introduced here to explicate the ontological nature of sculpture more generally.

In the *Rondanini Pietà*, each and every carved mark is made palpable by the sensuously temporal nature of its organic matter (Fig. 6). The marks wittingly transpose themselves onto each other creating instants of illusionistic metamorphosis. Here, a multitude of chance encounters with the visibly malleable matter is transfigured by the close proximity of indentations; in fact, their material specificities become a quiescence of chance, rather than of static physicality. As if viscous, the matter is infused with animate qualities by the viewer's explorative participation in discerning the persistent becomings of carved form. Challenging stasis, the accidental surface is suspended in unrest challenging the viewer to acknowledge

the impossibility of seizing a holistic impression of multitudinous instants made perceptible in the layered porosity of the stone.

The temporal and sequential mutations impressed in the flesh-like quality of the marble prolong the eventual pause of the viewer's perceptual process of engagement. It is the transience of these chiseled impressions that demand successive movements around the stone block. Transfiguring the sculpture anew, the previously concealed and minutely perceptible forms come into being with each varying stride of the viewer's physical placement in front of sculpted matter so as to challenge the comprehensibility of the work as a whole (Fig. 7-10). A synthesis of different phases of sculpting, remnants of previous compositional arrangements and bodily contortions are enveloped into the mutating nature of the stone. The becomings of form made visible by sculpted matter encourage the viewer's eyes to linger across the surfaces and the iterant protrusions that come into being; in turn, any possibility of seizing a holistic, stagnant, and resolute understanding of the subject matter is in fact denied and ruptured by this animate quality of the *infinito*.

Interpreting the sculpture scholars become entangled in trying to determine the artistic intentions behind the formal qualities of the work, leading them to judge it complete or incomplete. By taking the *Rondanini Pietà* as a starting point and deconstructing the scholarship on the work I want to suggest a new theoretical framework for discussing sculpture more generally. The project is meant to provide a way of thinking about the sculpted medium in ontological terms—terms that bring us closer to explaining the persuasive nature of the medium. By utilizing the term *infinito*, I want to suggest that the rhetorical quality of the medium, more generally, rests in the potentialities captured in the visibility of its matter: its physical, material, and essential qualities. Rather then implying infinity, as a quantity, the term is meant call attention to the possibilities of perceiving sculpted matter and form through the viewer's willingness to become part of the work.

Segregating matter from form belongs to the well-established Cartesian tradition often used by art historians to describe and interpret sculpture, as I argue, by obscuring the interdependent relationship between viewer and artwork—subject and object. The dichotomy between form and matter places matter in the realm of *res extensa*¸ while form is seen as that which determines the subject matter. Moreover, the Kantian reconceptualization of the Cartesian dichotomy, which equates form with Idea—the idea of the artist—has allowed sculpture to be conceptualized as if it were a static, flattened, and subject driven medium. The historiography of the *Rondanini Pietà*, discussed in the first section, reveals just such a trend and presents a unique problem for discussing the work in terms removed from iconography of the subject matter and biography of the artist. However as I will explain in the following sections, fifteenth and sixteenth-century art theorists discussed sculpture in terms that hinged on determining the qualities particular to the medium by being attentive to its material specificities: its matter.

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Coupled with form, sculpted matter was seen in sixteenth century as having distinct characteristics that set it apart from painting and established its ability to solicit the viewer to engage with its three-dimensional matter and carefully determined forms. The oratorical quality of sculpture was seen as dependent on its matter, an idea that is greatly sublimated in the post-Cartesian tradition. Devoting considerable attention to sculpted matter, made poignantly visible in the *infinito*, allows me to challenge previous interpretations of the *Rondanini Pietà*. In order to assert that the *infinito* does not subsist in the formal qualities of the sculpture but is dependent on the viewer (who is made to see the complex relationship between form and matter) a brief discussion of the Cartesian formulation of the dichotomy between matter and form will lead me to a consideration of how it has been refuted and reconceptualized by four twentieth-century philosophers, including Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Gilles Deleuze. The concept of the *infinito* is greatly informed by this later tradition; however the discussion of the *Rondanini Pietà* in the last section of the paper will help clarify the extent to which the ideas presented by the four philosophers are useful only in so far as they allow me to frame my own theory on the relationship between sculpted matter and form.

Without attempting to present a singular interpretation to Michelangelo's sculpture, the theoretical framework introduced through the idea of the *infinito* is meant to help us rethink the ontological nature of sculpture. By starting with a work whose historiography reveals some of the most tenacious convictions about the artist and his oeuvre, as well as what sculpture should 'look like', the stake of this project is to provide a way for discussing sculpture in terms that can allow us to think about what is prior to the process of interpretation and contextualization of any single sculpted work. Importantly, I argue, negating matter denies sculpture its material specificities and rhetorical potential to engage the viewer, who is a quintessential part in perceiving the union of matter, form and subject matter.

Limits of Interpretation: Historiography and Iconography of the *Rondanini Pietà*

Unlike many of Michelangelo's earlier works, scholarship is limited on the *Rondanini Pietà*.[1] However, there is a rich body of primary sources, including the artist's late drawings, poems, and an earlier sculpture, the *Florentine Pietà* (1550-1552), which aids in contextualizing the work within his larger oeuvre. Both Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550 and 1568) and Ascanio Condivi's *Life of Michelangelo* (1553) are often utilized as if historically specific and contextually authoritative sources that represent an aggrandized image of the life and personality of this historical figure, even though these form a small portion of sixteenth-century sources that discuss Michelangelo's work.[2] In addition, the biography of the artist has been complicated by several twentieth-century psycho-biographical analyses, modeled on Sigmund Freud's essay on Leonardo da Vinci.[3]

Although omitted from Condivi's book, this un-commissioned sculpture is mentioned in the second edition of the *Lives*, where Vasari comments on the abandoning of work on the *Florentine Pietà* (Fig. 11-13) and subsequent return to the *Rondanini Pietà*.[4] In addition, Michelangelo's student Daniele da Volterra reported that the artist worked on this sculpture six days before his death on February 18, 1564; it is also believed that this work was referenced in a notarized inventory made upon the artist's death, described as "another statue begun of a Christ and another figure above, attached together, blocked out and not finished."[5] This description provides evidence of the unfinished nature of the work, and testifies to the uncertainties of its subject matter, both fundamental sources for subsequent scholarship. From these sources emerges the tenacious conviction that this is Michelangelo's last work.

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[1] John T. Paoletti, "The Rondanini Pietà: Ambiguity Maintained through the Palimpsest," in *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 21, No. 42. (2000), 53-80; 53-4.

[2] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, II, trans. Beroge Bull (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1965); Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl (Baton Rough: Louisiana State University Press, 1976); Francisco de Hollanda, *Four Dialogues on Painting,* trans. Aubrey F. G. Bell (Westport, Ct.: Hyperion Press, 1979).

[3] Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (New York: Norton, 1964); Psychoanalytic studies of Michelangelo, include: Robert S. Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study of His Life and Images* (Westford, Mass: The Murray Printing Co., 1983) and Jerome D. Oremland, *Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling: A Psychoanalytic Study of Creativity* (Madison, Conn.: International Universities Press, 1989). For a critical discussion of Freud's essay on da Vinci, see, Bradley I Collins, *Leonardo, Psychoanalysis and Art History: A Critical Study of Psychobiographical Approaches to Leonardo Da Vinci* (Evanston, III: Northwestern University Press, 1997).

[4] Vasari states: "it was now necessary for him to find another block of marble, so that he could continue using his chisel every day; so he found a far smaller block containing a Pietà already roughed out and of a very different arrangement." Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists* (1965), 405.

[5] Daniele da Volterra described it as "una Pietà in braccio all Nostra Donna;" Vasari, *La Vita di Michelangelo, nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568*, IV, ed. with commentary by Paola Barocchi (Milan: R. Ricciardi, 1962), 1677, as quoted in Paoletti, 54.

In 1807, two and a half centuries later, the sculpture was mentioned in an inventory of Marchese Guiseppe Rondanini, a prominent art collector, whose initials 'MGR' are visible on the base of the sculpture (Fig. 14).[6] Its provenance is questioned with the following note: "In the middle to the intercolumn of the entrance there stands a modern group roughed out and said to be the work of Michelangelo Buonarroti."[7] Despite this uncertain history, a cast was made of the sculpture, which was exhibited next to Michelangelo's *David* in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence for the celebration of the fifth centenary of the artist's birth in 1873.[8] The sculpture remained in the Palazzo Rondanini, on Via del Corso in Rome, until it changed owners when it came into the possession of the Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura in 1945. A year later, the Galleria Borghese in Rome and the Musei Civici in Milan were campaigning to obtain the work. Consequently, it was only in 1952 when the sculpture was bought by the city of Milan and exhibited in Castello Sforzesco that it became accessible to the public, broadly speaking, and to the academic community.[9]

Charles de Tolnay's 1934 article introduced the sculpture into modern scholarship providing an interpretation of the work that went largely unchallenged until early 1990s.[10] He argues that the roughly sculpted work "comes to represent in the personal life of the artist the fulfillment of his longings, that state of beatitude toward which his unsatisfied soul aspired."[11] Similarly, scholars Philipp Fehl and William E. Wallace discuss the *Rondanini Pietà* as a carrier of a single theme, that of salvation.[12] For Fehl, the last two pietas represent the artist's goal "that we may be blessed as we stand before his works and for a moment discern...the fine sound of the sweet perfection that resides in God alone;"[13] while Wallace argues that the elimination of extraneous figures that appear in *Florentine Pietà*, Mary Magdalene and Nicodemus, suggests that Michelangelo believed that salvation was to be achieved "mainly through personal devotion to Christ."[14] This theme of salvation and the biographical approach

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[6] L. Salerno and E. Paribeni, *Palazzo Rondanini* (Rome, 1964), as cited in Maria Teresa Fiorio, ed., "The Testament of Marble," in *The Pietà Rondanini* (Milano: Electa, 2005), 14.

[7] Salerno and Paribeni, *Palazzo Rondanini*, 305; as quoted in Fiorio, 14.

[8] Fiorio, 16.

[9] Ibid., 15. As Fiorio explains, the sculpture was in a private collection of Count Sanseverino-Vimercati in Rome for the first part of the twentieth century.

[10] Charles de Tolnay, "Michelangelo's Rondanini Pietà," in *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 65, No. 379, (Oct., 1934), 146-157. De Tolnay's study was followed by others, including Fritz Baumgart, "Die Pietà Rondanini," *Jahrbuch der Preußischen Kunstsammlungen* LV (1935), 44-56; and, Dagobert Frey, "Die Pietà-Rondanini und Rembrandts 'Drei Kreuze,'" in *Kunstgeschichtliche Studien für Hans Kauffmann* (Berlin: Mann, 1956).

[11] De Tolnay, *The Art and Thought of Michelangelo*, trans. Nan Buranello (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 157.

[12] Philipp Fehl, "Michelangelo's Tomb in Rome: Observations on the "Pietà" in Florence and the "Rondanini Pietà,"" in *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 23, No. 45 (2002), 9-27; William E. Wallace, "Michelangelo, Tiberio Calcagni, and the Florentine "Pietà," in *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 21, No. 42 (2000), 81-99.

[13] Fehl, 24.

[14] Wallace, 87 and 94.

have remained prominent in scholarship on the work. In contrast, my analysis of the sculpture challenges the ways in which scholars have interpreted primary sources through the lens of a biographical approach, which ignores or sporadically fragments, the historical, religious, and art theoretical contexts of sixteenth-century Italy.[15] For the purpose of this thesis, I will very briefly sketch the environment, in order to situate the work within it.

In Rome Michelangelo worked on several monumental and architectural projects commissioned and supervised, directly or indirectly, by ten Popes who took office between 1503-1566 (Saint Peter's *Pietà*, 1501; Sistine Ceiling, 1508-1512; *Tomb of Julius II,* 1504-late 20s; *Risen Christ*, 1519-1520; *Last Judgment,* 1534-1541; Campidoglio, 1538-1650; *Martyrdom of St. Peter* and *Conversion of Saul,* 1542-45; St. Peter's plan/façade/dome, 1545-1564). These commissions were direct attempts to reaffirm and propagate the political and religious centrality of the city during the years that saw political tensions between the Papacy and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, that materialized during the Sack of Rome in 1527, instigating further political and religious schisms. Sketching the historical context further*,* it is necessary to take into consideration the detrimental outcomes of Martin Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* (1517)*,*[16] the Protestant Reformation, accompanying iconoclasm, the meetings of the Council of Trent (1545-64) and the Counter-Reformation. Of crucial importance is the fact that the body of Christ itself became a topic for debate, since the nature of the Eucharistic change—transubstantiation—was made dogma only in 1551.[17] Recall that the *Rondanini Pietà* was begun in 1552. I will return to these issues later in the thesis in order to suggest how the work could be contextualized within Reformation debates; however, it is crucial to my argument to first explicate why previous interpretations fall short of adequately situating the sculpture within this context and explaining how the sculpture works to encourage the viewer to perceive its subject matter.

Perhaps one of the reasons why much of the scholarship on the *Rondanini Pietà* suppresses this historical situation in favour of a biographical approach is because the temporal nature of the *infinito* makes visible the traces of the artist's hand indexed on the surface of the marble. This in turn pulls the interpretive process towards discussions of artistic intentionality, a desire among scholars to 'complete' the work. In Pliny the Elder's *Natural History,* which circulated among learned erudite courtiers and humanists in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the author explains how works thought to be the artist's last and left unfinished encourage the viewer "not only [to] see the outline depicted, and the very thoughts of the artist expressed, but [to] have the composition additionally commended to our notice by the regrets

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[15] Hubert Damisch, *A Childhood Memory by Pietro della Francesca*, trans. John Goodman (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007).

[16] Martin Luther, *Ninety-five Theses*, ed. Stephen J. Nichols (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub., 2002).

[17] Lee P. Wandel, *Eucharist in the Reformation: Incarnation and Liturgy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 216; See also, Salvatore Caponetto, *The Protestant Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, trans. Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi (Kirksville, Mo.: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999).

which we must necessarily feel on finding the hand that commenced it arrested by death."[18] Taking up this biographical approach to interpret the *Rondanini Pietà*, scholars become entangled in such a process of mourning and judge the qualities of the *infinito* as a state of incompletion. However, I argue that the *infinito* cannot be understood in terms of Pliny's mourning of the absence of the artist which conditions and precedes the encounter between the viewer and the artwork—an encounter anticipated by the artist, as scholars have repeatedly observed in general accounts of Michelangelo's sculptural work.

The *Rondanini Pietà* is part of 25 (of 42) extant sculptures by the artist that are considered to have been left in the state of incompletion—the *Slaves* intended for the tomb of Pope Julius II being the most famous of them. In his *Lives,* Vasari explained the reasons why Michelangelo left some of his works unfinished, while overtly focusing on the artist's excessive drive to bring his commissions to completion, wholeness, and perfection. Specifically, he purported that the sculptures were in this state either because the artist was not content with the imperfections and fissures of the marble block, or, because he did not have time to complete these, and other projects, due to the high volume of patrons' demands for new commissions.[19] As Creighton E. Gilbert has observed, later art theorists were divided on whether the *non-finito* was a sign of the artist's impetuousness or if incompleteness was an intentional quality of his works.[20]

Johann Winckelmann ignored the *non-finito* altogether, praising Michelangelo for upholding the Classical ideal of human form, calling him a "latter-day Phidias."[21] Alternatively Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel made an exception for Michelangelo's sculpture, which did not fit within the categorical schema of his teleological theory of the history of art.[22] But there were some theorists and practitioners in the nineteenth century for whom the *non-finito,* as a state of incompletion, was a defining focus. Eugène Delacriox, who drew flattering parallels between Michelangelo's "genius" and his own, exalted the sketch-like quality of *non-finito* for demanding close observation of the contrasts produced between the finished and unfinished parts of the sculpture.[23] For John Ruskin, what characterizes the *non-finito* is a

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[18] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History,* trans. John Bostock and H. T. Railey, Vol. 6 (London: H.G. Bohn, 1855-57); 281.

[19] Creighton E. Gilbert, "What Is Expressed in Michelangelo's "Non-Finito,"" in *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 24, No. 48 (2003), 57-64; 57-58.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Hugh Barr Nisbet, ed. *German aesthetic and literary criticism. Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe,* V. 1, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 47.

[22] Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel on the beauty of sculpture" in *Hegel and the Arts*, ed. Houlgate (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 56-89; Houlgate explains that for Hagel, "Michelangelo in particular—a cast of whose *Pietà* Hegel saw in Berlin and could not 'sufficiently admire'–displays the most outstanding "productive originality" in combining "the plastic principle of Greeks with the sort of soulful animation *Beseelung* intrinsic to romantic art;" quote, 77.

[23] Gilbert, 60.

play between light and shadow, akin to painterly effects—as seen in the luminous landscape paintings of his contemporary, Joseph M. W. Turner.[24]

These earlier approaches parallel those of several twentieth-century art historians who discuss the characteristics that I have assigned to *infinito* by repeating familiar aesthetic terms; terms that form tendentious and paradigmatic interpretation of Michelangelo's sculptural works more generally. While some like James Saslow and Howard Hibbard dismiss the *Rondanini Pietà* as, respectively, "a visual miscarriage"[25] and "hardly a potential work of art…a wreck…unbearably pathetic."[26] Others, like Igael Tumarkin and Jean-Pierre Barricelli, see the sculpture as a finished product that was *not* meant to be completed,[27] which in effect creates a new aesthetic of the unfinished—of course this bears consideration with the *informe*, as defined by Georges Bataille and explored by Rosalind Krauss, Georges Didi-Huberman, among others.[28] In contrast to these interpretations, I argue that the *infinito* is not an aesthetic quality of the work; thus, it cannot result in judgments pertaining to whether the sculpture is in a state of completion or incompletion. Moreover, to consider the work to be *non-finito* is problematic which is why I have introduced the concept of *infinito* to help account for some of the qualities usually assigned to the 'unfinished look' of the sculpture.

The museum information sheet from Castello Sforzesco explains that the work "can be seen as a palimpsest [as posited by John Paoletti] in which the superimposition of the new "text" has partially cancelled the signs of the original text and what remains of the first version can be considered "unfinished" solely because of the unavoidable coincidence of the suspension of work on the death of Michelangelo."[29] This is a rather perplexing statement; while proposing that earlier version is "unfinished" and that the later is not, it also suggests that these versions are superimposed in the work. However, I argue that to consider the work, or a part of it, to be unfinished means to presume that the artist did not have time to complete it prior to his death or that he did not intend on doing so. From the sources listed above it is possible to suppose either to be true. The argument I am making does not depend on either of these possibilities; in fact, I would like to suggest that the very idea that the work is *non-finito* implies a certain set of ideas that make it possible to classify the *Rondanini Pietà* along other sculptures

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[24] Ibid., 61.

[25] James M. Saslow, "Introduction," in *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, Michelangelo Bounarroti, trans. and intro. Saslow (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1991), 53-80; 35.

[26] Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 289.

[27] Avigor W. G. Posèq, "Tumarkin's Homage to the *Pietà Rondanini*," in *Assaph II* B, 2 (1996), 193-204; Jean-Pierre Barricelli, "Michelangelo's Finito: In the Self, the Later Sonnets, and the Last Pietà," in *New Literary History*, 24, no. 3, Textual Interrelations (Summer, 1993), 597-616.

[28] Georges Bataille, "Informe," in *Documents*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (December, 1929); "Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: MIT Press, 1997); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Le ressemblance informe, ou, Le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Editions Macula, 1995).

[29] Castello Sforzesco, information sheet obtained on May 2, 2010, "Michelangelo, the Rondanini Pietà" (Milano, Comune di Milano, nd).

by the artist based on its formal and iconographic specificities. This is a crucial point on which my argument diverges from most previous considerations of the work.

Existing interpretations of the work are embedded in the Kantian tradition, which was preceded by Vasari who argued: "la scultura è una arte che levando il superfluo dalla materia suggetta, la riduce a quella forma di corpo che nella idea dello artefice è disegnata" ("sculpture is an art which takes away the superfluous from the given material and reduces it to that shape of the body which is designed in the idea of the artist").[30] Furthermore, I argue that the Ovidian and Neo-Platonic traditions[31] often associated with Michelangelo's *non-finito* produce a dichotomy between form and matter, because both are articulated in primarily conceptual terms divorced from the perceptual and temporal field of the viewer. I want to stress that the Ovidian interpretations are quite pertinent to understanding how Michelangelo's so-called *non-finito*, particularly the *Slaves*, were contextualized within the literary and theoretical tradition that was widely disseminated in humanist circles. As Paul Barolsky, explains:

> Traditionally, the [*Slaves*] have been justly interpreted in terms of Michelangelo's Neoplatonic or Neo-Aristotelian philosophy, expressed in his poetry, where he speaks of liberating the figure from the stone, which already contains its form or *concetto*. … [This is] tied to the aspiration of the soul to escape from the "earthly prison" of the body. By itself philosophical and theological interpretation is sound, but it is also incomplete, for such philosophy and theology are conjoined with Michelangelo's sense of sculptural poesis, with his Ovidian sense of carving as itself the poetic "metamorphosis" of stone...[32]

Barolsky's argument and historiography of the concept of *non-finito*, as related to Ovidian metamorphosis and the Platonic metaphysics of Idea given in form, are important for understanding the literary tradition and its theoretical applications. However, utilizing this framework for interpreting and explaining the specificities of Michelangelo's sculptures, in particular, the *Rondanini Pietà*, is limiting. The theoretical conceptualization of metamorphosis and "imperfect form" reduces the relationship between the viewer and sculpture to aesthetics of sculpted form; however, the relationship is what allows for such transformative or metamorphic qualities of sculpted form to be visible on sculpted matter.

By introducing the new theoretical framework I want move away from these ideas by considering an interpretation of what I have termed *infinito* posited by Alexander Nagel who argues that the formal qualities reveal the process of sculpting that should be understood as "a form of archeological digging, a

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[30] Original quote from, Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. R. Bettarini, with commentary by Paola Barocchi (Florence, 1966), i, 11-27, as cited with translation in, Thomas Frangenberg, "The Art of Talking about Sculpture: Vasari, Borghini and Bocchi," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 58 (1995), 115-131; 116.

[31] See, Paul Barolsky, "As in Ovid, So in Renaissance Art," in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), 451-474.

[32] Ibid., 462-463.

means of excavating an earlier conception of the sculpture."[33] This metaphor of excavation describes the reversal of the finishing process that gets evaluated in Michelangelo's sculptures based on aesthetic terms of the ideal of human form and smoothly polished surfaces.[34] Moreover, Nagel's interpretation stresses the temporal quality of the work because it makes palpably visible the various stages and processes of sculpting. This is also posited by John Paoletti who argues that the *Rondanini Pietà* should be understood as a sculptural palimpsest that is "a simultaneous presentation of sequential and even conflicted moments in time."[35] While my reading of the sculpture takes up this temporal quality, it diverges from these interpretations, because the scholars do not attribute it directly to the *infinito,* but *locate* it within the formal elements of the sculpture and its 'unfinished' state, the *non-finito*. Consequently, the scholars focus on formal elements leading them to pose arguments that suggest intentionality. Paoletti explains that the formal qualities suggest the artist's religious convictions and a possible refutation of Papal authority in matters of human salvation.[36] For Nagel, however,

> Michelangelo's lifelong preoccupation with the theme of the *Pietà*, and specifically with the cult-image tradition of the *imago pietatis*, constitutes a sustained meditation on the fate of the religious image at the beginning of the modern era. .…[The] last work, finally, acknowledged the impossibility of the project itself. In its unfinished state, surrounded by the ruins of the earlier conception, it stands, indeed, as no more than an acknowledgement. It is the self-consumed relic of a form of art whose history had come to an end.[37]

By neglecting to discuss sculpted matter the primary concern in these, like other scholarly interpretations, is deducing the sculpture's subject matter from its formal characteristics. In doing so, they do not take account of the viewer's participatory role and negate the deterring function of the *infinito* that serves to complicate any easy interpretation of the subject matter.

Interpreting the iconography of the *Rondanini Pietà*, scholars have noted the ambiguities that arise when identifying the subject matter of the figural composition.[38] The elements remaining from the previous two phases of sculpting, notably the muscular arm protruding on the left (Fig. 15),[39] were

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[33] Alexander Nagel, *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 214.

[34] Following Leon Battista Alberti, Giorgio Vasari, Benedetto Varchi, among other art theorists in the sixteenth-century characterized the production of sculpture through the process of excavation (*levere*) or removal of material (noted bellow, ft. 85).

[35] Paoletti, 57.

[36] Ibid., 71-2.

[37] Nagel, "Observations on Michelangelo's Late Pieta Drawings and Sculptures," in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte,* 59 Bd., H. 4 (1996), pp. 548-572; 572.

[38] Ibid., 53-4.

[39] The musculature of a protruding arm to the left of the figural composition is the main remnant of the initial stage of sculpting the work. Two main hypotheses imply that the arm was either a form of *vanitas* reminding the artist of the drastic shift in composition and the need to abandon it, while the other implies that it was

suggested by de Tolnay to correspond to a scene of *Entombment* of Christ's body depicted by Michelangelo on an *Oxford* drawing sheet dated to 1550.[40] While his study of the sculpture presents critical observations of the narrative composition, tentative dating of the work, and a close study of different phases of sculpting, de Tolnay did not address the identity of the standing figure from the initial version; subsequent scholars have concluded that it was probably Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea, yet, the figural composition is interpreted as a Pietà—the presentation of dead Christ by the Virgin Mary.[41] The different phases of sculpting and the ambivalent poses of the two figures visible on the *Rondanini Pietà* correspond to different iconographic traditions of representing Christ's Passion. Significantly, the compositional specificities of this sculpture make its iconographic repertoire contingent in the *infinito*.

We can note that the standing pose of the Virgin who holds the body of Christ (Fig. 16) is exceptional for it further calls attention to the distinctive nature of the subject matter that deviates from traditional iconography of the Passion, particularly in sculpture. Thus Nagel's insistence on the importance of the *imago pietatis* (Man of Sorrows) in Michelangelo's earlier works, despite the scholar's negation of this in relation to the *Rondanini Pietà*, is not to be overlooked. For it is only in altarpieces that the motif of the standing Virgin holding Christ is depicted. The standing pose, however, makes it possible to understand it also as a Deposition; while the limp body of Christ whose feet seem to be slipping onto the edge of the stone matter is reminiscent of Entombment. These ambiguities, or rather possibilities, are given to the viewer as he or she circles around the stone block, moving closer and further away from the indentations that surface from the stone. Through such an embodied and temporal engagement the viewer becomes part of how the sculpture works.

The temporally palpable and morphing forms instigate their own malleability by revealing the layering of different phases of sculpting, so that the indentations, fissures, smoothed surfaces, and remnants of previous facial and figural shapes unfold into each other. The ambiguity of the subject matter, which is a result of the deterring nature of the *infinito*, should be understood in terms of how Michelangelo, among other artists of the sixteenth century, experimented with combining different

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aesthetically important to providing compositional balance between the forms. In recent restoration work on the sculpture, Sabina Vedovello has noted that when the marble was reworked in its new figural composition the center of gravity had been shifted back, towards the outer margin of the base supporting it; thus, the block is unstable without it; Sabina Vedovello, "The Work on the Pietà Rondanini," in Fioro, 113.

[40] Ibid., 151; Paoletti, 56. The drawing sheet, one of several sheets of drawings that take-up a similar theme of a pieta and scenes from the Passion from the Ashmolean Museum (Parker, no. 339), is produced in almost all publication on the *Rondanini Pietà* and generally presumed to be a study for the sculpture. In particular, one composition from the sheet is identified as being similar to the sculpture.

[41] Aurelio Gotti, *Life and Works of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, trans. and ed. Charles Heath Wilson, (London, 1876), 560, as cited in Paoletti, 60.

temporal moments and iconographic traditions into a single work—a point that cannot be explored in any depth within the present study.[42]

At the beginning of this section I introduced several sources that help to contextualize the *Rondanini Pietà*, including Michelangelo's earlier sculptures, drawings, and poetry, and a large corpus of literature that discusses the artist's biography and art theory. Elsewhere I have considered these sources, particularly those that have often been studied in relation to the *Rondanini Pietà*. Encompassing various media produced across several decades, this earlier study allowed me to pose several important questions about the approaches taken to study the *Rondanini Pietà*. In turn, it became evident that contextualizing the work in relation to these other sources prior to considering these questions is problematic and results in a comparative analysis of Michelangelo's sculptures. The primary reason as to why my approach does not seek to explicate the *Rondanini Pietà* in terms of Michelangelo's stylistic development by contrasting it to other *pietas* or the so-called *non-finito* is because this would inevitably lead the argument to be rooted in the biographical, iconographical, and structural approaches. By introducing *infinito* my aim is to highlight the inadequacy of any approach to the work that is based in aesthetic and formal judgments, while simultaneously explaining why the reduction of sculpted matter to form is a methodological problem. This thesis does not make claims about Michelangelo's oeuvre, artistic intention, or religious convictions, nonetheless the approach to be outlined here allows the *Rondanini Pietà*—and other sculptures by the artist—to be contextualized in existing methodologies, either to refute or complicate previous interpretations.

A recent article by Jas` Elsner, "Art History as Ekphrasis," is a perfect segue to the next section of this study, as it serves to point to some of the ways in which the *Rondanini Pietà* has been interpreted, described, and contextualized.[43] Elsner takes-up the sculpture to explicate his claim that "art history is ultimately grounded in a method founded on and inextricable from the description of objects:" ekphrasis.[44] Certainly, I would agree that the 'ekphrastic' approach to artworks is predominant in art history; however, this is not the only descriptive method.

Elsner's reading of the *Rondanini Pietà*, drawn from notes he had taken down when viewing the work in Milan, is an example of ekphrasis. After providing a description of the formal qualities and an identification of the subject matter of the sculpture, Elsner explains his approach:

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[42] See, Nagel, *Michelangelo and the Reform in Art*. Pontormo's altarpiece of the *Lamentation* (Capponi Chapel, Santa Felicita, Florence; 1525-1528) is a perfect example of a work in which multiple iconographic traditions are blurred; see, Leo Steinberg, "Pontormo's Capponi Chapel," in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Sept., 1974), 385-399.

[43] Jas` Elsner, "Art History as Ekphrasis" in *Art History*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Feb. 2010), 10-27.

[44] Ibid., 11.

Now it may be that Michelangelo really did think about finish and unfinish, fragmentation and completeness in statuary in relation to antique survivals – as I tentatively suggest here. Or even that he did not think about this but was conscious of it in some part of himself during his handling of the stone or as part of the very process of sculpting. But clearly it is my own tendentious claim – or that of the tradition in which I write? – that his sculpture looks forward into modernism itself. Here the exercise of comparisons – Donatello, the Pisani, ancient statuary, Michelangelo's own other pietàs, Rodin, Giacometti, Henry Moore – is itself interestingly ekphrastic. For though none of these examples is a description of a work of art, each invokes both a set of characteristic works (the Vatican pietà being the most specific one) and a set of standard accounts in art history. *My own interpretation (interpretative description) builds on these and might be said to be meaningless to anyone without a sense of the tradition in which they unfold.* That is, my ekphrasis is founded upon and related to a series of other ekphrases (none of which I have read in the immediate context of writing the piece, some of which I read long ago and some of which I have[never read)... [Emphasis mine.][45]

The approach, as the scholar points out, is grounded in the 'ekphrastic' tradition that "may be said to elide the object, which it professes to discuss centre stage, as merely the emblem or figment of a tradition in which that object (as 'Michaelangelo's last sculpture'—error in original) was inevitably a player but not necessarily so savvy and self-conscious a player as my interpretative impulse has made it."[46] In contrast to Elsner and previous scholarship on the *Rondanini Pietà*, I want to suggest *how* the sculpture works, to put it 'centre stage.' To do so it is important to be attentive to the ways in which the work challenges many preconceptions we may have about sculpture produced by Michelangelo and a larger tradition of sculpture produced since. To interpret the work it is not enough to put it within this tradition and then point out how it differs or is similar to, formally or iconographically, from other sculptures. The work disrupts and challenges how we describe, interpret, and think about sculpture altogether which is this single work is fruitful for rethinking sculpture more generally.

Moving away from pre-established approaches to Michelangelo's sculptures, the theoretical approach introduced in this paper serves to explain what precedes, and allows for, the process of "descriptive interpretation."[47] I am rooting my argument in an analysis of the *Rondanini Pietà*, I would argue, for reasons opposing those of Elsner. In order to explain how the temporal relationship between sculpted matter and form, the *infinito*, entrains the viewer in ways in which it deters any easy interpretation of its subject matter and formal qualities. The uncertainty of the subject matter of the *Rondanini Pietà* calls attention to the ways in which the *infinito* deters the viewer from taking any single vantage point to see the sculpted forms or from reading any single iconographic tradition into its subject matter. The consolidation of form and matter in the *infinito* is particularly relevant to the discourse of fifteenth and sixteenth-century art theories in which the visibility of sculpted form and matter was related

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[45] Ibid., 23.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

to the rhetorical quality of art, conceived of in terms of its relation to nature and cognitive processes of perception.

By locating the concept of matter within these discourses the next two sections highlight the ways in which sculpture as a medium was discussed in theoretical and practical terms. Here, I want to suggest that theoreticians either explained the function of sculpted matter by relating it to sculpted form, naturalism and ideal proportions, or in terms of it being a distinctive quality of sculpture setting it apart from painting. These art theories are crucial to understanding sculpture produced in the early modern period. Importantly, a discussion of contemporary art theory allows me to question why art historians studying the period have often disregarded sculpted matter as a relevant component of how sculpture as a medium serves to negotiate subject matter and form in overtly temporal ways that, not only require, but depend on the viewers' participatory engagement.

The sections following this discussion will briefly outline how modern philosophy, from René Descartes to Martin Heidegger, is fruitful in explicating the reasons as to why sculpted matter may have been overlooked by art historians discussing the *Rondanini Pietà*, and sculpture more generally. Outlining this philosophical trajectory helps ground the segregation of sculpted matter in frameworks that stand outside of the methodologies utilized to construct the canon of Renaissance sculpture—with Michelangelo, arguably, standing at its pinnacle.[48] Importantly, the *Rondanini Pietà* will be reintroduced in each section of the thesis in order to explain how I use the work to challenge the historiography presented above, as well as, how it can be fruitful for rethinking sculpture as a medium—its three-dimensionality, physical and material presence and potentiality to invite the viewer to become part of the work, things that artists working with the medium in the twentieth and twenty-first century have called attention to and challenged in their own works.

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[48] Georges Didi-Huberman's study on wax as a material used in sculpture sets an important precedent for considering the material and physical specificities of the medium. In particular, his tracing of the philosophical and theoretical sources that use the quality of wax for the purpose of describing diverse ideas is crucial to the explanation of the nature of the material, both in terms of artistic practice and viewers' experience. See, Georges Didi-Huberman, "Order of Material: Plasticities, Malaises, Survivals," in *Sculpture and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Brandon Taylor (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006); also, Didi-Huberman, "Ex-Voto: Image, Organ, Time," in *L'Esprit Créateur*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2007) 7-16.

Leon Battista Alberti: The Rhetoric and Visibility of Sculpture

Scholars studying the early modern period often point out that in fifteenth-century art treatises perspective was discussed as a technical and theoretical framework that allowed practitioners and theorists, such as Leon Battista Alberti, Piero della Francesca, and Leonardo da Vinci, to delineate ways in which painting could best claim the viewer's attention with its two-dimensional representations—either with use of one or multiple vanishing points. Most of these theorists incorporated classical and medieval optics in order to develop their discussion on the mathematical and functional nature of perspective. Moreover, scholars argue that much like fifteenth-century treatises on painting, theorists on sculpture focused on elevating their medium to a status of liberal arts. In general, these theorists emphasized technical complexities of production of painting and sculpture and insisted that artists be well versed in humanist rhetoric, classical texts, and contemporary theories in other liberal arts.

While humanist rhetoric was still important to theorists in the sixteenth century—such as those who will be discussed bellow: Giorgio Vasari, Pietro Aretino, Benvenuto Cellini, Benedetto Varchi, Vicenzo Danti, Lodovico Dolce, Raffaello Borghini, and Francesco Bocchi—their treatises mostly focused on differentiating between media, particularly emphasized in the debates on the *paragone*.[49] The establishment of a diverse vocabulary, borrowed from contemporaneous discourses on poetry, philosophy, and classical literature, allowed sixteenth-century theorists to emphasize the persuasive character of art. However except for Varchi and Bocchi, those participating in debates on the *paragone* negated the technical and mechanical nature of the process of producing painting while overtly emphasizing the same in sculpture.[50] This negation was closely related to the concept of mimesis embedded in the philosophical tradition of (Neo-)Platonism.[51] In contrast, the philosophical framework of Aristotelianism, which was gaining prominence in Florentine theories on rhetoric in the mid-sixteenth century allowed for the elevation of art based on the idea that through imitation art had the ability to perfect upon nature. These two philosophical traditions were often amalgamated and merged when applied to various discourses. This issue is quite complicated and cannot be discussed in-depth, thus for sake of clarity and in order to highlight the changes in the theoretical frameworks and Classical sources

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[49] These debates, while known from classical and medieval sources, were a point of contention among sixteenth-century theoreticians who formulated terms of contrast between different literary and artistic traditions. Painting and sculpture, while often noted as stemming from one 'father' (*disegno* as Vasari argued), were compared in order to determine which medium was 'nobler' and had greater rhetorical potential.

[50] Leatrice Mendelsohn, *Paragoni: Benedetto Varchi's 'Due Lezzioni' and Cinquecento Art Theory* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982), 110.

[51] Ibid., 58.

used by the theoreticians I will be discussing the philosophical traditions, one Aristotelian and the other Platonic, in terms that give distinct meaning to each. Consequently, it is useful to note that these traditions were most often blurred in art theoretical discourses during the period and there are several points in my discussion where this will become apparent.

Modern scholars often discuss the ways in which fifteenth and sixteenth-century art theorists deem sculpture to be a manual art that lacks qualities espoused in painting, such as *istoria* and compositional complexity. However, this is an overt simplification since scholarship on these theories has not focused on sculpture in great detail, except when dealing with particular theorists. Because of the breadth of this discourse, spanning two centuries, I can really only trace the place of sculpture within them. By considering several theoreticians in relation to each other, I will primarily focus on how sculpted matter and form become negotiated in their discussions on sculpture. What I hope will become clear at the end of this section is that there was a (theoretical) shift in how sculpture was discussed. While fifteenth-century theories took-up optics, perspective and vision as a means of discussing the close relationship between art and nature (and, matter and form), sixteenth-century theories placed emphasis on the expressive quality of sculpture by explicating the visibility of sculpted form and matter.

Due to a shift in the philosophical understanding of art, moving from a largely Neo-Platonic framework—art as twice removed from truth and Idea—to an Aristotelian one, greater emphasis was placed on the potential value of each medium. Sculpted matter, as I will argue, was crucial to discussions on sculpture. Interestingly, most of modern literature on these theories primarily focuses on painting, often suggesting a firmly hierarchical relationship with sculpture as outlined in debates on the *paragone*. Regardless of the art theoretical focus or stance in the debates, both media were discussed in terms of the rhetorical nature of their material and physical qualities, meaning that the viewer was an integral part in understanding how each medium works. Following the example set in Alberti's treatises, the rhetorical potential of each medium was described in these debates on the *paragone* using ideas borrowed from Classical sources on rhetoric, including Cicero, Quintilian and Aristotle.[52] Some of the terminology from these sources was adapted and reworked into new concepts and ideas for describing and discussing artworks. While this cannot be explored in depth in this thesis, it is crucial to point out that in my discussion of the rhetorical potential of sculpture I am specifically referring to the idea of persuasion—the work's capacity to move the spectator, as Alberti has emphasized in his concept of *istoria*.

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[52] See, David Summers, "Contrapposto: Style and Meaning in Renaissance Art," in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Sept., 1977), 336-361, and *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1986), and, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Premier in Social History of Pictorial Style* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1988; and, Carl Goldstein, "Rhetoric and Art History in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque," in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (Dec., 1991), 641-652.

In the fifteenth century, Leon Battista Alberti wrote treatises on painting, sculpture, and architecture, which sought to elevate the social status of art, while overtly focusing on the technical and mechanical processes of production as a way of emphasizing that the final product had rhetorical and thus socio-political value. Alberti produced a treatise on each of the 'three sister arts' many scholars, nevertheless, tend to disregard his larger oeuvre and focus only on *De pictura* (1436) and *De statua* (dates debated; ca. 1440s or 1460s).[53] As a result, they present a partial understanding of his theories by arguing that he regarded sculpture as a manual art incapable of reproducing *istoria*.[54] In addition, it is generally assumed that Alberti discussed sculpture primarily in mathematical and technical terms that emphasized the sculptor's need to copy from nature by reproducing accurate proportions of the human body. Importantly, in his treatise on architecture, *De re aedificatoria* (1452; published, 1485), Alberti includes a considerable discussion of sculpture and explains the reasons as to why naturalism and proportional arrangement in sculpture has social and ethical value.[55] These two treatises formulate a better understanding of Alberti's theories on sculpture.[56] Paralleling the relationship between his tract *De punctis et lineis apud pictores* (ca. 1450-55) and his treatise on painting, it is only in the *De re aedificatoria,* as Jane Andrews Aiken has observed, that Alberti "makes [explicit] the relationship between beauty, perfect numbers, and proportionate relationship of the parts and the principal law of nature."[57]

Alberti formulated the technical categories of sculpture, based on different processes of production in *De statua*. Here he states that a process of adding or taking away material characterizes the production of wax or clay statues. Sculptors working in stone produce works by taking away matter in contrast to those working in the medium of bronze, where production is defined through a process of addition. This is repeated in Vasari's treatise in which he introduces a hierarchical relationship between the different materials placing marble sculpture 'in the round' at the zenith.[58] Uniting these processes of production, Alberti proposes a system of measurement based on *dimensio* and *finito,* which are to be

[53] First written in Latin, 1434, Italian edition in 1436; Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and Sculpture*, trans. and intro. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972). This earlier translation by Grayson is used because it is referenced by three sources used bellow. A different edition is cited in note 78 for Alberti's *On Painting*.

[54] See, Jack M. Greenstein, "On Alberti's "Sign": Vision and Composition in Quattrocento Painting," in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (Dec., 1997), 669-698.

[55] Jonathan B. Riess, "The Civic View of Sculpture in Alberti's *De re aedificatoria,*" in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1979), 1-17; 2.

[56] Ibid., 4-5; See also, Jane Andrews Aiken, "Leon Battista Alberti's System of Human Proportions," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 43 (1980), 68-96.

[57] Aiken, 89.

[58] Giorgio Vasari, *Vasari on technique; being the introduction to the three arts of design, architecture, sculpture and painting, prefixed to the lives of the most excellent painters, sculptors and architects*, trans. Louisa S. Malehose, ed. with intro and notes G. Baldwin Brown (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 143-153.

measured using two tools: *finitorium* and *exempeda*.[59] As he writes, "*dimensio* follows and governs that which is more stable and fixed in nature and more commonly found in living creatures, such as lengths, thicknesses and widths of limbs, whereas *finito* records and determines the variations in limbs from time to time caused by movement and new dispositions of the parts."[60] These two types of measurement, according to Alberti, should be taken directly from live models in order to produce a system of forming different parts of the human body. Consequently, the inclusion of a lengthy *Tabulae dimensionum hominis* ("Table of the Measurements of Man" calculated by Alberti) is meant to aid sculptors in formally reproducing accurate proportions based on live models—or, nature. The emphasis on measurement and proportions follows Cennino Cennini's discussion of the relationship between the face and the whole body in the *Libro dell'Arte* (c. 1437); however, as Aiken explains, by utilizing Vitruvius' treatise on architecture and classical aesthetics, particularly emphasized in the writings of Plato and Cicero, Alberti rearticulates his own theories of proportion and universals of beauty in nature and proposed that the same be reproduced in art.[61]

I would like to suggest that by emphasizing the differences between *dimensio* and *finito* Alberti is not proposing that sculptors simply imitate from nature, but is urging them to be attentive to the subtle changes in the form of human body that can be perceived through close observation of living matter. Alberti's theories are embedded within the Platonic idea of mimesis—art as being 'twice removed' from Truth, or Idea. Rather than elevating art above nature, as is common in the Aristotelian tradition emphasized in sixteenth-century art theory (a point to which I will return later) Alberti sought to elevate the notion of imitating from nature in terms of it having a oratorical and social value—for both painting and sculpture. While this is not evident in *De statua*, in *De re aedificatoria* Alberti explains the reasons why naturalism is important in sculptural works.[62] There he argues, according to Jonathan B. Riess, that sculpture is "uniquely suited to the embellishment of the city because of its formal qualities, because of the subjects represented by the sculptor, and because of the sheer force of its physical presences."[63] In this treatise he establishes the history and function of sculpture. By utilizing Classical sources, Alberti emphasizes the value of sculpture as being in relation to, and in service of, the ethical, social, and political fabric of the city. Placement of sculpture within the architectural framework is extremely important for Alberti, since sculpture is a type of architectural and civic ornamentation: "an additional brightness and

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[59] Ibid., 75-77.
[60] Alberti, *On Painting and Sculpture*, 135.
[61] Aiken, 80.
[62] Reiss, 2.
[63] Ibid.

improvement to beauty [which] is something lovely which is proper and innate and diffused over the whole body."[64]

For Alberti, "ornament is something added and fastened on, rather than proper and innate to [beauty];" [65] however, sculpture as ornament, has the ability to represent beauty emblematic of the larger civic body. As Reiss points out, Alberti considers sculpture to be "emblematic of the noble and magnificent city to which the citizen proclaims his devotion;"[66] accordingly, "naturalism in sculpture can now be better appreciated, for only naturalistically modeled figures on the triumphal and commemorative monuments [as seen in Classical Rome] can 'move' men to virtuous behavior."[67] Claiming that sculpture should always have a commemorative function, by representing divinities or important civic leaders, allows Alberti to argue that naturalism in sculpture is important. Thus sculptors should strive for achieving perfect proportions that correspond to how human bodies are experienced in real space and time. Consequently, through use of naturalism a didactic quality of sculpture can be realized, which is further augmented by its placement within the civic or ecclesiastical infrastructure.[68] By revealing the importance of compositional space of freestanding sculpture within civic space, according to Reiss, Alberti seems to be rehearsing ideas similar to the nature of figural arrangement in pictorial composition.[69] In *De pictura* Alberti argues that naturally rendered figures must be properly placed in relation to the overall composition of *istoria*.

In the first book of *De pictura* Alberti outlines the technical and geometrical aspects of one-point perspective in order to aid the painter's eye in mechanically reproducing dimensions of the spatial construction of *istoria*. Much like proper measurement of proportion in the production of sculpture, Alberti proposes that geometrical perspective be part of the technical process of painting. In fact, Jack Greenstein explains that for Alberti the role of pictorial composition, which produces *istoria*, is related to the cognitive role that vision has in producing knowledge about the world.[70] Utilizing classical and medieval theories on vision, Alberti proposes a system of perspectival ordering of pictorial composition that can imitate nature and reproduce it in a two-dimensional medium. In the opening paragraph, Alberti explains his approach to painting:

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[64] Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. James Leoni (London, 1726; 1955), Book IV, ii, 113, as quoted in Reiss, 3.
[65] Ibid., Quote is part of the same cited above.
[66] Reiss, 7.
[67] Ibid., 11.
[68] Ibid., 7.
[69] Ibid., 11.
[70] Greenstein, 670.

> [We] will take first from mathematicians [*a mathematicis*] those things which seem pertinent to the topic.... [Then] we will explain the rules of painting from nature herself.... [Mathematicians] measure the species and forms of things [*species et formas rerum*] with mind [*ingenium*] alone, divorced entirely from matter. But since we wish things to be placed under sight [*sub aspectu*], in writing we will utilize, as they say, a more fleshy wisdom [*pinguiore Minerva*].[71]

Certainly, Alberti's theory on perspective explains how "species and forms of things [known with] mind alone, divorced entirely from matter" can be compositionally united within the frame, or window, of a painting. In the treatise, Alberti raises epistemological issues in relation to the processes of producing and viewing painting through his discussion of one-point perspective. Greenstein explains that many of the ideas were common knowledge among students of optics and stem from classical and medieval sources— from Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC), Galen (131-201), and Abu Ali al-Hasan ibn-al-Haytham (known as Alhazen; ca. 965-ca. 1039), to St. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-1273), Roger Bacon (ca. 1214-1294), and fifteenth-century optics.[72]

Alberti's discussion of perspective as a means of organizing the surface of the painting condenses well-known ideas in optics. As Greenstein notes, his use of the idea of "'species and forms of things…divorced entirely from matter' accords with scholastic definitions of intellectual knowledge."[73] Explaining Alberti's usage of earlier theories, Greenstein explains the application of specitif terms used in optics, in particular the term species. Bacon proposes that *species* are natural signs of objects that "[produce] every action in the world, for [they] act on sense, on intellect, and on all matter of the world for the generation of things."[74] "Ordered by the soul towards signification," *species* "signify by their essence and not by the intention of the soul."[75] According to Alhazen and Aquinas, *species* are "universal forms or *phantasms*"[76] that get stored in memory as cognitive information of the things perceived. Alberti utilizes this last definition to suggest, as Greenstein explains, "that painters study the appearances of bodies [*species*] in nature and fix the things that they have learned deeply in memory."[77] Moreover, Greenstein argues that Alberti's suggestion follows Alhazen's explanation of how the intellect comprehends *accidents*, since it is only "when the surfaces and members are properly composed, [that the] species of the depicted things are immediately recognizable by prior cognition."[78] As Greenstein

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[71] Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture*, (1972), I.1, page not provided; as quoted, with emphasis by Greenstein, 681.

[72] Greenstein, 683.

[73] Ibid., 681.

[74] Roger Bacon, *Opus Majus*, ed. J. H. Bridges (London, 1900), IV. 2.1; quoted from a secondary source by Greenstein, 688; Thomas Aquinas claims *species* or forms to be sensible images through which the sense perceives.

[75] Bacon, *Opus Majus*, Book IV; as cited in Greenstein, 688.

[76] Greenstein, 691.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

notes, Alberti altered optical theories in order to formulate the geometrical system of perspective in painting.[79]

Theoreticians of optics discussed the ways in which objects are visually perceived in their entirety, which Alberti utilized to propose how painting should be organized through a visual pyramid and single-point perspective, and extrinsic rays that measure the surface "as if with that instrument called a compass."[80] Through this organization, Alberti posits an ideal viewing point of spectators in front of a painting.[81] Through optics, his pictorial perspective thereby establishes the relationship between nature and art. For Alberti, all things "must be sought with the greatest diligence from Nature and always directly imitated, preferring those in painting which leave more for the mind to discover than is actually apparent to the eye."[82] What is not apparent to the eye through perspectival illusion—that seems to emphasize, rather than negate, the Platonic notion of *mimesis* in art—is the rhetorical nature of *istoria*, which if represented correctly, has the potential to "move spectators."[83] It is the effect of *istoria*, rather than perspective, that allows the viewer to see the objects and figures depicted as if they were in relief.

Because "sculpture is easier and surer than painting," Alberti proposes that painters study from sculpture by claiming, "no one will ever be able to paint a thing correctly if he does not know its every relief, and relief is more easily found by sculpture than by painting."[84] While Alberti begins his treatise on painting by arguing that the qualities of painting can be judged by sight, his insistence that painters need to *know* every relief of the things reproduced through perspective is nevertheless indicative of the fact that sculptured matter is perceived and produced differently. Perhaps this is best emphasized by Alberti's assertion that "people can copy paintings more easily than sculptures, as they always look the same."[85]

In *De statua,* Alberti argues that a sculptor achieves "similitude," according to Aiken, "if he is able to define the specific or accidental qualities of a particular man while also shaping the image according to the generally true, unvarying, and fixed qualities in all men."[86] Moreover, Alberti writes in *De pictura*: "As man is best known of all things to man, perhaps Protagoras, in saying that man is the scale and the measure of all things, meant that accidents in all things are duly compared to and known by

[79] Ibid.

[80] Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture*, (1972), I.6, page not provided; as quoted, with emphasis by Greenstein, 695.

[81] Marin Jay, "The Noblest of the Senses: Vision from Plato to Descartes," in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 21-82; 54, 81.

[82] Alberti, *On Painting,* trans. Cecil Grayson, intro. and notes Marin Kemp (London: Phaidon Press, 2004); II. 41, 76.

[83] Ibid., III. 58, 92.

[84] Ibid., 92.

[85] Ibid, I. 31, 65.

[86] Aiken, 71.

the accidents in man."[87] Because 'man' is the measure, symbolically and literally (*braccia,* an arm's length), Alberti articulates the ways in which the rhetorical potential of painting and sculpture can be achieved through careful articulation of *accidents* that make up the cognitive role of sensory perception. In sculpture this is achieved through physical measurements of bodily proportion and in painting through the geometric and perspectival organization of the pictorial surface.

Lorenzo Ghiberti and Pomponius Gauricus' theories on perspective and art are incongruent with the Albertian model, in which perspective and measurement are described as technical systems particular to art.[88] Ghiberti's discussion of perspective is rather confusing due to the incongruent nature of his citations. Interestingly, while Ghiberti summarized Alhazen's theory of optics he excluded any discussion of Alberti's treatise on painting—written prior to the commencement of Ghiberti's *Commentarii.*[89] Writing in the first decade of the sixteenth century, Gauricus promotes perspective as a geometrical system that has a practical function in constructing *istoria*. However, unlike Alberti, he does not propose that such a system be utilized in practice.[90] Gauricus denied that geometrical perspective exists apart from its relationship to the viewer and physical space, which he defined as a "continuous quantity, consisting of three physical dimensions, existing by nature before all bodies and beyond all bodies, indifferently receiving everything."[91] Because, both Ghiberti and Gauricus were sculptors it is important to understand their considerable attention to the geometrical and optical rules of perspective, which they studied primarily in order to explain how objects and artworks are perceived; unlike Alberti who utilized these theories to also propose how each media should be produced..

One of the reasons for discussing Alberti in this section is to call attention to the ways in which art historians have overlooked the place of sculpture within the theories on perspective and optics. Significantly, the essential qualities of sculpture were understood through its material and physical characteristics where optics and perspective helped reaffirm the essence of sculpture as a three-dimensional medium. Because it has specific physical and material properties sculpture, according to Alberti, had to adhere to mathematical and proportional rules in order to have the rhetorical potential for which it was uniquely suited. Being attentive to the physical and material specificities of sculpture allowed the theoretician to suggest how sculpture could take part in the ethical and social fabric of a city.

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[87] Alberti, *On Painting* (2004) I. 31; 53.

[88] Lorenzo Ghiberti, *I Commentarii*, ed. Lorenzo Bartoli (Florence: Giunti, 1998); for, Pomponius Gauricus' *De Sculptura,* 1504. Robert Klein, "Pomponius Gauricus on Perspective," in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Sep., 1961), 211-230.

[89] Kathryn Bloom, "Lorenzo Ghiberti's Space in Relief: Method and Theory," in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Jun., 1969), 164-169; 164.

[90] Klein, 213. Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of Cloud: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 115.

[91] Gauricus, *De Sculptura*, as quoted in Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 66.

The mathematical rules on proportion and composition Alberti were important for proposing how sculpture should be made in order to ensure that it had the potential to draw the viewers' attention. Understanding that we engage with and perceive sculpture differently from painting was an important point on which later theoreticians based their arguments in the debates on the *paragone*. Going back to the *Rondanini Pietà* I want to explain how this discourse can be utilized to describe the work.

Perceiving the *Rondanini Pietà* it is impossible to view it from a single vantage point standing in front of the work (Fig. 1). Problematically, however, few publications on the work have reproduced images that show the multivalence of the vantage points made available by the large marble block. With these come a range of possible angles in which the sculptural composition reconfigures itself anew. Standing in front of the work, the viewer is invited to observe the material and physical specificities of sculpted matter. The vertical thrust of the composition is prolonged through the various shapes that the block takes as the viewer moves around to see it fully. Perceiving these angles the sculpture itself becomes transfigured because an impossibility of seizing it in its entirety captivates the viewer, prompting her or him to circumambulate the work in order to see it from various perspectives. Made available in the sculpted matter are minutely perceptible formations in the composition that come into view only through this process of moving around the sculpture.

Constantly shifting, the figural forms that give shape to the block urge the viewer to move around, to move closer and away. The work thereby calls attention to its own three-dimensionality, physicality and materiality. However these qualities are not perceived only spatially, since the viewer is constantly made to perceive the temporal mutations of the forms visible on the marble. The figures within the block seem to take different formations through this process in a way that disrupts the viewer's previous understanding of their location. Consistently and from each varying angle, the bodies of the Virgin and Christ transfigure themselves in a way that changes the composition as a whole—and with it deters the comprehension of the subject matter.

Frontally, the body of Christ is presented in its entirety to the viewer, while the upper torso of the Virgin protrudes above his head (Fig. 18). Slightly tilted to the left, the entire composition has a vertical thrust that calls attention to the minute bend in Christ's torso and the Virgin's right hand as it reaches to hold the body of her son. From this angle the composition is given two platforms on which each of the figures is positioned. The Virgin's right leg firmly stands upon a raised footing that recesses in the front and provides a resting for Christ's contorted legs. His feet seem to slide into the base of this recession (Fig. 19) further highlighting the weight of the Virgin's body. Curiously neither of Christ's arms is made visible, and yet, the protruding muscular arm from the previous stage of sculpting hangs to the right as if it were a piece of bark. Not fully revealed out of the stone block, Christ's right arm seemingly hugs the Virgin's body. There is an uncertainty in comprehending the composition of the two figures from the

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frontal view in a way that urges the viewer to move around and try to determine how the figures are positioned and if the figure of Christ is falling or being held by the Virgin. Interestingly, the slightly turned heads of the figures and the twist of Christ's legs encourage the viewer to move to the right side of the sculpture.

Moving to the right the viewer can notice that the sculptural composition becomes most legible from this side as the Virgin's body comes into view. The footing of her legs, however, appears to correspond to the slant made by the protruding arm as it comes into view behind the body of Christ, giving balance to the slight bend of their two bodies (Fig. 7). Her body is given more weight in comparison to the figure of Christ, who we can now see has a thinner frame (Fig. 8). The Virgin's upper torso hovers over Christ's with her chin resting on the upper portion of his head and her arm on his shoulder (Fig. 16). Imperceptible, his right arm is left for the viewer to perceive out of Virgin's large cloak. The facial features of both figures discernible in the multitude of indentations are transfigured from this angle (Fig. 20). While the face of the Virgin gains masculine features due to a larger jaw, the facial features of Christ are highly contorted by the variously sized indentations. Revealed in the headdress of the Virgin are remnants of the facial features belonging to the standing figure from the previous composition to which also belongs the large gaping slit visible on her gown. Merging and enfolding one another the upper torsos of the figures stand in stark contrast to the lower portion of their bodies as Christ's legs, removed from the viewer and positioned to the far right, seem to slip into a slightly curving base (Fig. 17). The hard bend of the Virgin's back urges the viewer to move to the back of the stone block.

Highly curved, the back of the block hides the two figures, their torsos and poses (Fig. 9). The composition is exchanged for a markedly rough surface that arches inward on itself. The viewer is left perplexed and made to observe the indentations that outline the bending flesh of the stone. The back reconfigures the entire work as if to prepare the viewer for perceiving it afresh. Captivated by the markings that are solidified on the surface there is an impossibility of escaping the materiality of the stone matter; with no visible forms to rest one's gaze the chiseled gaps and fissures overtake the perceptive field of the viewer. The top is not visible to the viewer as it curves upward and away from the viewer. However, the lower portion reveals an oddly shaped base whose hard edges and rectangular shape make it reminiscent of a large piece of rock. Out of this base rises the back of the Virgin next to which on the left hand-side, as if not attached to the same base, emerges a vertical shape (Fig. 21). This is the back of the protruding arm. As a remainder from a previous composition it does not stand on its own; rather, it is connected to the side of Christ's body by the skin of the marble block making its shape substantially larger in the back then it appears to be when seen from other sides. This oddly-shapely protrusion draws the viewer to move further to the left.

Moving to the left, the viewer is confronted with perceiving an altogether different shape of the block in which the entire composition shifts disrupting any easy comprehension of what was perceived earlier (Fig. 22). Reminiscent of a manuscript letter, the stone block is given a C-shape because the composition is conduced into a gentle curve that seems to pull downward. A drape-like indentation frames the still frontal body of Christ giving the composition its unique shape from this angle (Fig. 23). Both of the figures' heads are turned to the left and away from the viewer. The figural contours of the Virgin are obscured from this angle; visible are the shoulders, head, and right arm that rests gently on the upper shoulder of Christ. While his entire torso seems to be upright, the lower portion of his legs from the knees down swerve awkwardly into the base of the block. As if pulled by gravity, his body merges with the curve of the block only to be cradled by its base. The protruding arm comes into its fullest view from this angle, becoming part of the view given of Christ's torso. Absorbed by the composition, the arm replaces the lack of a left arm visible on the figure of Christ. From this view the body is no longer supported by the Virgin and seems to be caught in a temporal moment of slipping downward.

Arguably there are numerous other viewing angles made available by sculpted matter. Nonetheless, what this description calls attention to is the fact that there is an impossibility of perceiving the work in its entirety without acknowledging the process by which it comes into visibility. Constantly in the process of becoming, the larger formations visible in the composition become vivified as the viewer perceives the material and physical specificities of sculpted matter. The forms, either minutely perceptible or large enough to be seen from most angles, are not stagnant or firmly enfolded within what we think to be the subject matter. The work organizes how we perceive, move around, and understand the subject given. Encouraging the viewer to move physically to perceive the sculpture, the *infinito* does not exist outside of viewer's perceptive and embodied experience, nor does it subsist in the formal qualities.

The material and formal qualities that Alberti assigned to sculpture as a medium were revisited by sixteenth-century theoreticians, however this time within the Aristotelian theory of art as something that has the potential to perfect upon nature. Within the debates on the *paragone,* the material qualities of sculpture were also a way of either espousing or denouncing its capacity in relation to painting. The attention given to sculpted matter within these theories will allow me to argue further for the ways in which the *Rondanini Pietà* appeals to the beholder.

Locating Sculpted Matter in Sixteenth-Century Art Theory

Alberti's *De Pictura* and *De Statua* were published in several editions in the early sixteenth century prompting the wide use of his concept of *istoria* in art treatises as a point of reference in the debates on the *paragone*—probably instigated by Leonardo da Vinci and promulgated through the wide circulation of Baldessare Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano* (began 1508, published, 1528).[92] What characterizes sixteenth-century art theory is the distinctive focus on establishing the rhetorical and affective qualities of both sculpture and painting. In the process of distinguishing between the two media theorists who participated in the debates on the *paragone* commented on the material qualities of sculpture in relation to painting. While noting that sculpture was more long lasting and physically more laborious to produce, several theorists nonetheless followed Leonardo's idea of the main difference between painting and sculpture to be defined by the process of production. Leonardo famously explains,

> the sculptor pursues his work with great physical effort, and the painter pursues his with greater mental effort. This may be proved, for the sculptor in producing his work makes a manual effort in striking the marble or stone, whichever it is, to remove what is superfluous and extends beyond the figure shut in it. This demands a wholly mechanical exercise that is often accompanied by much sweat and this combines with the dust and turns into a crust of dirt. His face covered with this paste and powdered with marble dust, like a baker, and he is covered with tiny chips as if it had snowed on him. His lodgings are dirty and filled with stone splinters and dust.[93]

Interestingly, Leonardo discusses several other points of difference besides the mode of production. Leonardo denies the fact that sculpture produces multiple viewing points, which is a distinctive quality of its matter, by stating that sculpted figures are produced similarly to bas-relief; thus, there are only two angles in sculpture: front and back.[94] Also the durability of its matter is a quality of the medium that has nothing to do with *ingegno*. Similarly, the fact that sculpture has its own qualities of light and shadow is due to 'assistance' from nature.[95] Several art theorists rehearse Leonardo's distinctions between the two media in which sculpture was denied the most intrinsic quality of its matter: three-dimensionality. This quality was subjugated and devalued in the most often cited commentaries on the *paragone*.

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[92] Robert Klein, ed., *Italian art, 1500-1600: Sources and Documents* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 17.

[93] Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, in *Leonardo on Art and the Artist*, ed. André Chastel and trans. Ellen Callmann (New York: Dover Press, 2002), 43.

[94] Ibid. See, also Martin Kemp, "Leonardo and the Space of the Sculptor," *in An Overview of Leonardo's Career and Projects until c. 1500*, ed. Claire Farago (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 237-262.

[95] Leonardo, *Treatise on Painting*, 44.

Varchi's *Due lezzioni* (1549) were an important contribution to debates on the *paragone*.[96] Varchi's theory is influenced by Aristotelianism, which gained prominence in the middle of sixteenth century due to a rediscovery and translation of Aristotle's *Ethics, Poetics* and *De anima*.[97] Varchi consolidated Aristotle's theory of imitation with Platonic Ideas, allowing *arte* to be elevated above nature and gain a 'divine' status akin to poetical rhetoric.[98] Using Aristotelian theories Varchi was able to assert that art did not simply imitate nature, but perfected upon it. Moving away from the concept of *mimesis* in art (art as twice removed from truth) the ethical and didactic nature of art was professed through the 'new' philosophical framework.[99] This allowed later art theorists, including Vasari, to reformulate the relationship between art and nature in terms different from those epitomized in Alberti's treatises. For example, in *Il primo libro del trattato delle perfette proporzioni di tutte le cose che imitare e ritrarre si possano con l'arte del disegno* (1567), Vicenzo Danti writes:

> By the term *ritrarre* I mean to make an-other thing exactly as another thing is seen to be; and by the term *imitare* I similarly understand that it is to make a thing not only as another has seen the thing to be [when that thing is imperfect], but to make it as it would have to be in order to be of complete perfection.[100]

Arguably this statement, given by a sculptor, is related to Varchi's theories in which he utilized previous critiques of sculpture in order to explain the ways in which the medium was better suited to perfect upon nature.

In her study on Varchi's *Due lezzioni* Leatrice Mendelsohn explains that for Varchi (Platonic) beauty like (Aristotelian) art had two qualities: "one visible and active, rooted in reality and human perception [painting], and one which, although realizable in matter, corresponded more to ideal forms [sculpture]."[101] Due to the fact that sculpture relied on tangible matter, Varchi explains that "painting is…sophistry, that is [it is] apparent and not true, not unlike figures which appear in a mirror; one is conscious that those things that appear in the picture do not exist in reality [which] does not happen in

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[96] See, Mendelsohn; Two lectures delivered by Varchi at the Accademia Fiorentina in 1547; published in 1549 with eight letters appended of the published edition of the lectures. Except for Michelangelo's letter, which was probably received several months after Varchi's lectures were given, they are dated in-between January 28 and February 18, 1547. Letters came from several prominent artists and theoreticians: Giorgio Vasari, Bronzino, Maestro Iacopo da Puntormo, Maestro Tasso, M. Francesco S. Gallo, Maestro Tribolo, Benvenuto Cellini, and Michelangelo.

[97] Mendelsohn, 7-11; Mendelsohn explains that in the early 1540s, Aristotle's texts were translated and published, appearing in several rhetorical treatises on poetry written by Florentine theoreticians. In contrast, Platonism remained prominent in humanist circles in Venice.

[98] Ibid., 55.

[99] Ibid., 113.

[100] Vincenzo Danti, *Trattato delle perfette proporzioni: Il primo libro*, in *Scritti d 'arte del cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1971-76), Vol. 2, 1575-76, quote and translation in Fredrika Jacobs, "(Dis)assembling: Marsyas, Michelangelo, and the Accademia del Disegno," in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Sep., 2002), 426-448; 440.

[101] Mendelsohn, 77.

sculpture."[102] Following Aristotle who asserts that form already exists in matter, Varchi rearticulates the potential of sculpture, "which is achieved by means of excavation (*levare*)."[103] Unlike previous art theorists, Varchi did not negate the manual nature of art production, because the Aristotelian framework allowed him to emphasize its material and artificial qualities. As such, Varchi notes:

> Concerning artificial things, these are many and varied…, although they are still less worthy than natural objects, as natural objects are infinitely less perfect than divine, they do bestow, however, not only many and varied pleasures but are of the greatest value to human life…Without the arts we would not only not live as comfortably but would not continue to live. Nature, existing physically and temporally between art and divinity provides the measure of the closeness of each art to 'truth'.[104]

The process of excavating matter to reveal form in sculpted medium, as Mendelsohn explains, "presupposes [matter's] prior presence in the material itself and affirms the *essential unity of form and matter*. Sculpture's association with, indeed dependence on, matter elevates rather than contaminates the art [emphasis mine]."[105]

By articulating the Aristotelian concept of imitation in relation to the unity of form and matter in sculpture, Varchi argued that sculpture was "naturally closer to 'substance' than to accidents, [since] 'substance' in the Aristotelian sense [is] the most intense expression of a being or a thing, the palpable expression of the inseparability of form and matter," to use François Quiviger's words.[106] For Varchi, sculpture was closer to nature due to the "inseparability" of its form and matter, which allows sculptors to perfect upon its material, or *substantial* qualities. In contrast, utilizing the same Aristotelian terms, Alberti argued that painting was better suited to mimic nature due to its ability to fully reproduce *accidental* forms perceptible by sight and known through the cognitive process of intuition.

In Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* sculpture is excluded from all that makes *istoria* in painting, which is formulated through the concepts of *disegno* and *invenzione*.[107] Discussing classical relief, Vasari admits that it can have *istoria*. In contrast to Alberti who was attentive to the material diversity of sculpted

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[102] Benedetto Varchi, "Due Lezzioni nella quale si disputa della maggioranza delle arti e qual sia più nobile, la scultura o la pittura," in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento fra Manierismo e Controriforma*, ed. Paola Barocchi (Bari: Laterza, 1960), as quoted with translation in Mendelsohn, 77. Mendelsohn uses this and sources on the *Due lezzioni*, however the page numbers are not always provided.
    [103] Mendelsohn, 92.
    [104] Ibid., 113.
    [105] Ibid., 92.
    [106] François Quiviger, "Benedetto Varchi and the Visual Arts," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 50 (1987), 219-224; 223. Aristotle's philosophy, which states that accidents are the perceptible qualities or characteristics of that exist in substance, was the most prominent philosophical tradition used by Catholic theologians in their definitions of the nature of transubstantiation in the Eucharistic sacrament since the twelfth century. However, it was disputed and abandoned in the meetings of the Council of Trent and the 1550 Bull on the mysterious nature of the sacramental change from matter and from to the body and blood of Christ.
    [107] Frangenberg, 117.

medium, Vasari argues that sculpted reliefs lack the essential characteristics of sculpture that are given in form through the three-dimensionality of its matter.[108] However, the essential quality of art for Vasari is *invenzione* (invention) that produces *istoria,* "[where] figures are put together in four, six, ten, or twenty, to form battles and the other grand things of the art."[109] According to Vasari, *invenzione* and *istoria* can only be reproduced in painting and relief because sculptures can only be comprised of two or three figures.[110] As a result, this is equated with a lack of *istoria* and compositional complexity of the medium.

Istoria is the most important quality of painting, if understood in the Albertian sense, since it can guide the viewer in observing its subject matter and formal characteristics. This quality is not accorded to sculpture by Vasari. Consequently the discussion of sculpture in the *Lives* is often brief, with Vasari only identifying the subject matter and calling attention to the arrangement of the figures, and it suppresses the very nature of the sculpted medium and the three-dimensionality of its matter as espoused by Varchi. It is these qualities that Benvenuto Cellini identified as the most important characteristics of the medium *qua* nature, which allowed him to argue for the supremacy of sculpture over painting.[111]

Utilizing Vasari's concept of *disegno*, Ludovico Dolce's *Dialogo della pittura intitolato l'Aretino* (1557) establishes a dichotomous relationship between painting and sculpture. By characterizing the media as being paradigmatic of Raphael and Michelangelo's artwork, as Chris Murrey explains, Dolce contrasts Raphael's facility (*facilità*, defined as artifice or *artificio*) in painting to Michelangelo's *disegno* and *terribilità*.[112] Moreover, Dolce discusses the ways in which the human form is articulated in each medium, which was a point of parallel in Alberti. Importantly, he counters Vasari's argument that Michelangelo perfected the art of *disegno*—that which unifies the three sister arts—containing utmost *gratia*, or grace.[113] As Dolce writes:

> The man [or, Michelangelo] who practices a detailed elaboration of the muscles is really aiming to give an organized picture of the bone structure, and this is commendable; often, however, he succeeds in making the human figure looked flayed or shriveled up or ugly [*scorticato, o secco, o brutto*]. The man [that is, Raphael] who works in the delicate manner, on the other hand, gives an indication of the bones where he needs to do so; but he covers them smoothly with flesh and fills the nude with grace [*gratia*]. (Emphasis mine.)[114]

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[108] See, Frangenberg.

[109] Vasari, *Le Vite* (1564), ed. Barocchi, 115, as quoted with translation in Frangenberg, 117.

[110] Frangenberg, 116.

[111] On Cellini, see, Michael W. Cole, *Cellini and the Principles of Sculpture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Benvenuto Cellini, *The Treatises of Benvenuto Cellini on Goldsmithing and Sculpture*, trans. C. R. Ashbee (New York: Dover Publications, 1967).

[112] Chris Murray, *Key Writers on Art: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 93.

[113] Jacobs, 434.

[114] Lodovico Dolce, *Dialogo,* quoted in *Dolce's "Aretino" and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento*, ed. and trans. Mark Roskill (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 142-43.

As Chris Murrey explains, Dolce argued that Michelangelo "was preferred only by sculptors who responded solely to his *disegno* and *terribilità*, and the stirring grandeur of his figures, whereas Raphael enjoyed the esteem of *literati* and his fellow painters. They responded to Raphael's *facilità*, his 'facility', on the basis of his *maneria leggiadra e gentile*, his 'elegant and gentle manner'."[115] In addition, for Dolce, "*facilità* is most difficult to attain, that is an art to conceal art."[116] This idea of concealment points to the problems behind using the Platonic theory of art as *mimesis* and suggests how it was becoming merged with the Aristotelian concept of art.

Taking up Vasari's formal distinction between sculpture and painting in his *Il riposo* (1584), Raffaele Borghini defines five qualitative and evaluative terms that are meant to aid laymen in becoming amateur art critics and judge the aesthetic qualities of Florentine artworks.[117] These terms are: invention, disposition, posture, limbs, and colour. However, not all four can be utilized when evaluating the quality of a sculptured medium—which through Vasari has come to denote sculptures in the round.[118] By furthering Vasari's ideas that sculpted relief can depict *istoria*, Borghini argues that sculptures can only be judged on the basis of invention, proportion in limbs and accurate articulation of poses.[119] Moreover, Borghini explains that invention in sculpture is "a simple thing and particularly in the Apostles, which are so numerous and have been carved by so many."[120] Subsequently, judging the accuracy of subject matter, or invention, is deemed an easy task—as the medium lacks rhetorical qualities espoused in painting. The four interlocutors in *Il riposo* discuss several civic sculptures by applying Borghini's concepts to evaluate the proportions and poses of sculpted figures. Alberti's *De statua*, published in the 1560s, may have aided Borghini in defining the formal qualities of sculpture. In contrast, published in the same year as Borghini's text, Francesco Bocchi's treatise (1571; pub. 1584) on Donatello's *St. George* (ca. 1514) stands apart from all previous discussions of sculpture, while at the same time condensing them into a single framework.[121]

In *Eccellenza della statua del San Giorgio di Donatello*, Bocchi establishes a clear link between matter and form in sculpture and the viewer through the notion of *costume*.[122] Following Varchi, Bocchi incorporates Aristotle's *Poetics* and the concepts of *ethos* and *pathos* in order to explicate how sculpted form mediates *St. George*'s permanent character and intuitive emotion as expressed by his posture, limbs

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[115] Murray, 93.

[116] Dolce, *Dialogo* quoted in Murray, 93; no citation of original.

[117] Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo*, trans. Lloyd H. Ellis, Jr. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

[118] Frangenberg, 120.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Borghini, *Il Riposo*, 118. This statement is interesting in relation to the main argument posed in Bocchi's treatise, which takes-up such an example in his treatise on Donatello.

[121] Moshe Barasch, "Character and Physiognomy: Bocchi on Donatello's St. George a Renaissance Text on Expression in Art," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1975), 413-430; 413.

[122] Francesco Bocchi, "Eccellenza del San Giorgio di Donattelo (1571)" in *Tratti d'arte del Cinquecento fra Manierismo e Controriforma*. ed. Paola Barocchi (Bari, G. Laterza, 1960).

and facial expression.[123] These qualities have the ability to implicate viewers because they too possess the characteristics of *ethos* and *pathos*: one permanent and the other transient quality of human character.[124]

Bocchi utilizes three categories—*costume, vivezza,* and *bellazza*—in his discussion of sculpture. Understanding the first two as having to do with the "apparent life of the image," David Summers argues that Bocchi is primarily "concerned with the question of expression, with how an image is and is made to appeal to us in a certain way, as an apparently living, psychic presence."[125] As Bocchi explains:

> But what shall we say of that great force which this figure has in itself [namely] to create its own *costume* in those who look at it? [Men] who think fairly and are connoisseurs in these affairs know very well what Donatello has achieved in this noble respect; because there is nobody who would not agree and testify that the magnanimous *costume* of *St. George* removes and drives away mean and vile thoughts from the mind [of the spectator], replacing them by magnificent and high ones. Statues that have *costume* are more appreciated than the others, and by this vigor they show in some way a kind of movement and a kind of life, and create in the beholder noble thoughts, which is the aim of any other noble and better thing.[126]

Several significant points should be made from Bocchi's *costume*. Firstly, the theorist does not take up a contemporaneous work for his discussion and chooses a sculptor who is considered by modern art scholars to have made the first free-standing statue since antiquity (*David*, ca. 1440s). Secondly, he consolidates several theoretical and philosophical frameworks to remind his audience of the innate qualities of sculpture. It is possible to argue that his *costume* is a synthesis of the Albertian discourse on the socio-political value of sculpture and sixteenth-century theories on art that posited imitation of nature to be an innate quality of art giving it the ability to 'move spectators'. Thirdly, the naturalism of *costume* in *St. George* denotes civic *virtù*, but not only through sculpted form. Sculpted form allows the spectator to see the pathos of the saintly figure who awaits the foreseen future, while matter discloses St. George's character, and thus his permanent ethos and *virtù*. Thus, both form (pathos) and matter (ethos) are intricately bound to the sculpted subject matter and the perceptual field of the viewer.

By articulating the qualities particular to sculpture in terms of Aristotelian philosophy, both Varchi and Bocchi emphasize the relationship between form and matter as an innate essence of the medium—one that determines its visibility. Within this relationship the subject matter itself becomes intricately dependent on the viewer's participatory role, which is something I have emphasized with concept of the *infinito*. The *Rondanini Pietà* presents a unique example of how the viewer is challenged to perceive the enfolding of sculpted matter and form in a way that deters the comprehension of the subject matter of the composition and urges him or her to move around the block.

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[123] Ibid., 416.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Summers, *The Judgment of Sense,* 143-144.
[126] Bocchi, "Eccellenza del San Giorgio di Donattelo (1571)," 146, quoted with translation in Barasch, 415.

In the last section I have presented a description of what can be perceived of the composition from the four main angles taken by the viewer in front of the sculpture (Fig, 1, 7-10). What I have purposefully neglected to discuss is another characteristic of sculpted matter, one that further complicates the process of perceiving the work. I focused on discussing the compositional features and the larger forms visible on the stone block in order emphasize that sculpted matter is an integral part to thinking about how we describe sculpture as a medium—one that is highly determined by its physical essence, its three-dimensionality. However, the enfolding of matter and form in the *Rondanini Pietà* is markedly visible to the viewer due to minute markings that cover its marble surface and call attention to the very process of sculpting.

Making the chisel marks visible, the flesh-like surface of the sculpted matter invites the viewer to recognize the exceedingly material nature of the medium. The entire surface is punctured, as if inscribed, by variously sized indentations (for example see Fig. 6). Even the seemingly smooth surface of Christ's legs contain perceptible markings that reveal the process of production—taking away of marble matter. The larger forms that make-up the composition, such as the limbs of the figures, encourage the viewer to move around the stone block. Furthermore, the process of perceiving the sculptural composition from each angle is prolonged and temporalized by the multitude of indentations and markings visible on the surface. Calling attention to their material essence, the chisel marks cannot be considered simply as formal qualities of the work—as such, they are not forms. What I want to stress is that these are not aesthetic forms that can be understood in comparison to smooth surfaces that have a more finished look reminiscent of Michelangelo's other works and sculpture more generally. This would necessarily lead to the conclusion that the work 'looks' unfinished, incomplete and yet to be re-surfaced and polished. Instead, the porous surface of the marble reveals its own material essence and urges the viewer to recognize the interdependent nature of matter and form.

The viewer perceives the chisel markings in relation to the whole of the work, making them part of how the sculpture works. Each indentation differs from the other, and their relationship continually disrupts the perceptual process (Fig. 20). The figures' facial features, their limbs, and the contortions of their bodies are covered by fissures in a way that reconfigures them as the viewer moves closer up, away, and around the stone block. Within this movement, the marks become unstable transfiguring what is visible of the figures and the composition. The marks are animated by the viewer who is made to perceive their surfacing on the marble. In such a way, the fissures are enfolded by the matter of the stone which is visible to the viewer in the process of perceiving the becomings of form.

Enfolded in sculpted matter, the chisel marks are perceived as being mutating, shifting, contorting, and disruptive of what the viewer sees. These forms cannot be separated from the material that makes them visible or from the viewer who sees them as part of the composition which consistently

transfigures itself anew within these forms. Scholars have not really considered the ways in which these formations call attention to the very nature of the relationship between viewer and sculpture—a relationship that relies on perceiving the *infinito*. The enfolding of matter and form is in fact a process that vivifies the sculpture when it is perceived, thus it does not exist without a viewer. It is the rhetorical quality of sculpture. Only when we understand sculpture as a medium in such a way is it possible to think about its subject matter.

Given in form and matter, the subject is no longer something that stands outside of the formal or material specificities of a work, but is intricately bound to them. Thus, in perceiving matter and form the viewer also perceives the subject matter. Before returning to Michelangelo's *Pietà* and discussing the ways in which it is possible to recontextualize its subject matter in relation to the *infinito*, I want to first turn to modern philosophical approaches to the concepts of form and matter. A brief discussion of these approaches will allow me to emphasize the ways in which modern art historical interpretations of Michelangelo's sculpture are embedded in the post-Cartesian tradition that serves to subordinate matter to *res cogitans* by placing it in the realm of the body and sensory perception. In contrast, I will present the general framework of several twentieth-century theories on the nature of matter and form in order to argue for the ways in which a return to these Aristotelian concepts is in fact fruitful for any discussion of sculpture.

The Concepts of Matter and Form: A Brief Look at Modern Philosophy

According to classical and medieval optics, substantial and accidental qualities of matter are perceived through intuition. However, fifteenth-century art theorists, such as Alberti, did not claim a difference between nature and art. Lack of such differentiation is made explicit by Bacon, as Lisa Jardine explains, since for him "artificial does not differ from the natural in form or essence but only in the efficient; in that man has no power over nature except that of motion."[127] In contrast, sixteenth-century art theory espoused the idea that art could perfect upon nature—a point which Descartes refuted. By doubting that senses can articulate essential qualities of things existing in time and space, Descartes formulated his dichotomy of mind and body. In opposition to earlier theories, he claims that we can know and judge the essence of things, not through intuition or imagination (as posited in Aristotelian metaphysics), but through the *cogito*.

Descartes denounced Aristotle's optical theory of *species* as images, or *phantasms*, stating: "[philosophers'] sole reason for positing such images was that they saw how easily a picture can stimulate our mind to conceive the objects depicted in it."[128] In *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes takes up Aristotle's explanation of how senses perceive form without matter (similar to the way in which "wax receives the imprint of the ring without the iron or gold, and it takes the imprint which is of gold or bronze, but not *qua* gold or bronze")[129] in order to argue for a different understanding of sensory perception:

> [If] I judge that the wax *exists*, for the reason that I am touching it, the same consequence follows: namely, that I exist. If I judge it exists, for the reason I am *imagining* it, or for any other reason, again, the same certainly applies. But what I have realized in the case of the wax, I can apply to anything that exists outside myself.[130]

For Descartes, common sense or the imaginative power of the mind does not lead to knowledge of things (of course, this is refuted in phenomenology), which "themselves are perceived not, strictly speaking, by the senses or by the imaginative faculty, but by the intellect alone."[131] The subordination of senses to the intellect could not have been possible without the rationale provided in Descartes' *Dioptrics* (1634), what

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[127] Lisa Jardine, *Francis Bacon: Discovery of the Art of Discourse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 138.

[128] René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. and ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Donald Murdoch, two volumes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) v. I, 165.

[129] Aristotle, *De Anima: Books II and III (with passages from Book I)*, eds. D. W. Hamlyn and Christopher John Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) II 12, 424a17-21.

[130] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections form the Objections and Replies*, trans. Michael Moriarty (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), II. 34, p. 24.

[131] Ibid.

Neil Ribe calls "a foundational essay for [his] project of 'mastery and possession' of nature [through science and technology]," which calls attention to the limitations of eyesight and distortion through sensory perception.[132] At the end of the *Meditations* Descartes claims,

> I use sensory perceptions, which were specifically given by nature for signifying to the mind what things are beneficial or harmful to the composite of which the mind is part— for which purpose they are sufficiently clear and distinct—as if they were reliable criteria for immediately discerning the *essence* of bodies existing outside of us. Of this, however, they signify nothing, except in very obscure and confused fashion. [Emphasis mine.][133]

However it is only in *The Principles of Philosophy* (published in Latin, 1644 and in French, 1647) that a full denial of Aristotelian metaphysics was achieved through a subordination of matter—which forms a parallel with body in the hierarchy of the *cogito*—to cognition. Descartes reduces the plurality of possible substances in Aristotle to only two: matter and mind.[134] In fact, as T. Sorell points out, Descartes argues that the "principal attribute of matter is extension (the possession of length, breadth and height), and all the features of matter are reducible to 'modes' or modifications of this essential characteristic; thus a piece of wax, for example, may take on a variety of shapes, but all these are simply mathematically determinable modifications of *res extensa*"—'extended substance' known through the mind, *res cogitans*.[135] Later in the section I will take-up Henri Bergson's philosophical reformulation of matter and mind in terms that directly critique the Cartesian dichotomy by emphasizing time over space; however, it is first necessary to frame the post-Cartesian discourse on matter within later traditions in philosophy, briefly tracing the lineage from Immanuel Kant to Heidegger.

The previous section situated sculpted matter in art theoretical discourses contemporaneous to the production of the *Rondanini Pietà*. Here, I have tried to explicate the inheritance of the Cartesian tradition which posited a reduction of matter to form as a methodological and philosophical framework. It should be noted that while Descartes conceptually breaks apart the Aristotelian idea of the unity of form and matter, he does not utilize the concept of form as often.[136] Following the post-Cartesian tradition— revived through the work of Kant, whose critical idealism is critiqued by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century the concept of matter underwent crucial reconsideration,

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[132] Neil M. Ribe, "Cartesian Optics and the Mastery of Nature," in *Isis*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (Mar., 1997), 42-61; 43.

[133] Descartes, *Meditations,* VI. 83; p. 58.

[134] T. Sorell, "Seventeenth-century materialism: Gassendi and Hobbes," in *Routledge History of Philosophy, The Renaissance and 17th Century Rationalism,* ed., G. H. R. Parkinson (London: Routledge and Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 119-254; 202.

[135] Ibid.

[136] See, Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene, "The Cartesian Destiny of Form and Matter" in *Early Science and Medicine*, Vol. 2, No. 3, The Fate of Hylomorphism. "Matter" and "Form in Early Modern Science (1997), 300-325.

initiated by Bergson who is a significant figure in the establishment of phenomenology and deconstruction. However, there is a lack of a clear break between natural philosophy and what we would consider to fall under disciplinary categories of natural sciences really until the nineteenth-century. The tensions between the two started in early to mid-seventeenth century, instigating scholarly and institutional debates, and a development of new methodological frameworks for the study of the natural world. Schisms in the Catholic Church and the rise of Protestantism and Calvinism in the North allowed for the differentiation between religious and scientific ideologies, which laid claim to an epistemological understanding of the natural world removed from a divinely order cosmos. The philosophical and Aristotelian concept of matter was an important feature in these debates as it posed problems in its vague and inconsistent application in natural philosophy. By the end of the seventeenth-century, through the Cartesian framework of extension—matter in space—materialist explanations of matter sought to segregate it from its theoretical roots in metaphysics. This allowed a whole new framework for refuting matter, which in turn made it systematically quantifiable, (infinitely) divisible, and static.

David Hume, following George Berkeley, denied the concept of matter altogether.[137] In contrast, Kant argued that form cannot be deduced from matter but from reason—Idea: "the matter of all appearance is only given to us *a posteriori*, but its form must all lie ready for it in the mind *a priori*, and can therefore be considered separately from all sensation."[138] Thus, furthering the Cartesian dualism, albeit rooting it in perceptual experience, Kant conceived of an epistemological framework for understanding matter separately from form. Following Aristotle's *immanent teleology* and the idea that "matter *desires* form," Hegel insists on the interdependency of the two, as Horst Althaus has observed. Moreover, he posits an essential relation of *passive* matter to *active* form.[139] For Hegel, "what appears as the activity of form…is the authentic movement of matter itself," which is "not to be regarded as an existing thing in its own right, but was being as a universal or being in the form of the concept."[140] What allows form to have determinacy in matter is Hegel's theory of substance *qua* spirit, which is, as Daniel Berthold-Bond explains, greatly influenced by the work of Gottfied Leibnitz.[141]

By formulating substance in terms of a becoming (*Bewegung*), informed by Heraclitian and Aristotelian metaphysics,[142] Hegel posits, as Alfredo Ferrarin explains, that "spirit is the existent truth of

[137] John P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 108.

[138] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press: 1999), 155-6 (A20/B34).

[139] Daniel Berthold-Bond, *Hegel's Grand Synthesis: A study of being, thought, and history* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989), 69.

[140] Quote from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as in, Horst Althaus, *Hegel: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Michael Tarsch (Cambridge, UK; Polity Press, 2000), 133-4; citation of original not provided.

[141] Berthold-Bond, 69.

[142] Ibid., 68.

matter, the truth that matter itself has no truth."[143] Here matter, understood through its dependency on form, becomes intrinsically about motion because, as Ferrarin notes, "Hegel refuses to treat space and time as a Newtonian ready-made framework prior to the insertion of bodies and matter in motion," because "[nothing] falls outside movement."[144] Interestingly, Bergson argues for a similar relationship between spirit, matter, perception, and movement by asserting: "Spirit borrows from matter the perceptions on which it feeds, and restores them to matter in the form of movements which it has stamped with its own freedom."[145]

Bergson's general framework and philosophical writing on the concepts of matter and time have informed my own reconsideration of sculpted matter. As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, sculpted matter has the potential to organize and invite the viewer to move around to perceive and comprehend sculpted form and subject matter through a process that is necessarily temporal, embodied and phenomenal. Thus I want to turn to a discussion of the Bergsonian project on matter, memory, and duration (*dureé*) in relation to the phenomenological frameworks established by Husserl and reconfigured by Heidegger. Situated in-between the two, Gilles Deleuze's concept of the synthesis of time serves to present a more nuanced understanding of *dureé*, one that emphasizes the future rather then the present. At the end of the section, it will be possible to argue for a more nuanced understanding of sculpted matter and form as having an ontological interdependency.

Critiquing previous idealist and realist approaches to (perception of) matter, conceptualized either as a representation or a thing, Bergson instead argues that "matter is an aggregate of images"[146] and understood, as such, can help explain the "problem of the relation between body and soul."[147] Challenging Kant, who posits no relationship between "the matter presented to our intellect and this intellect itself,"[148] Bergson argues that life "is consciousness launched into matter."[149] Thus, mind can only exist *in* matter. Importantly, however, both are comprised of time as *dureé*—the basis of life (*élan vital*). Occupying duration, matter is no longer to be thought of as something quantifiable, divisible, and static—existing only in space. By emphasizing time, Bergson counters the primacy of space in the Cartesian tradition: matter *as* extension. This is a significant point, as Mark Antliff explains, because "to separate matter wholly from mind would be to deny that duration has extensity," since the "permeability of mind and

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[143] Alfredo Ferrarin, *Hegel and Aristotle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 254-5.
[144] Ibid., 228.
[145] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2004), 332.
[146] Ibid., 8.
[147] Ibid., x.
[148] Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1998), 358.
[149] Ibid., 181

matter, duration and extension, lies in the fact that duration has a rhythm, it is a synthesis of the temporal and spatial."[150]

According to Bergson, perception, having an important role in the reciprocal link between mind and matter, "measures our possible action upon things, and thereby, inversely, the possible action of things upon us."[151] This point serves to challenge the previous understanding of matter and how we perceive it. Moreover he posits that perception subsists in "things themselves,"[152] thus it is not enough to explain the difference of degree between matter and perception: as "*being* and *being consciously perceived.*"[153] This idea is crucial for understanding the interdependency between how we perceive matter and matter itself. In my use of the term matter I am specifically thinking about this interrelation. However, Bergson's project on matter and memory poses a problem, because he argues that perceiving matter is always dependent on memory.

Bergson argues that pure perception "places us" "within matter…and it is really into spirit that we penetrate by means of memory."[154] Thus memory serves as an "intersection of mind and matter,"[155] whereby, "all difference between perception and recollection is abolished, since the past is essentially *that which acts no longer*" and the present is "*that which is acting.*"[156] Accordingly, what we can perceive of matter is always conditioned by memory as perception always occupying certain duration—time. Furthermore, perception as pure and removed from memory does not exist. Of consequence is the fact that, as premised by Bergson, all we can have are *virtual* images of matter since perception and memory are interdependent. In 1910s, reflecting on his project in *Matter and Memory,* Bergson explains,

> memory seems to be to the perception what the image reflected in the mirror is to the object in front of it. *The object can be touched as well as seen; acts on us as well as we on it; is pregnant with possible actions; it is actual. The image is virtual, and though it resembles the object, it is incapable of doing what the object does. Our actual existence, then, whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image.* Every moment of our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other. Each moment of life is split up as and when it is posited. Or rather, it consists in this very splitting, for the present moment, always going forward, fleeting limit between the immediate past which is now no more and the immediate future which is not yet, would be a mere abstraction were it not the moving mirror which continually reflects perception as a memory. [Emphasis mine.] [157]

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[150] Mark Antliff, "The Rhythms of Duration: Bergson and the Art of Matisse," in *The New Bergson*, ed. John Mullarkey (New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 184-208; 188.

[151] Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 57.

[152] Ibid., 237.

[153] Ibid., 30.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Ibid., xii.

[156] Ibid., 74.

[157] Bergson, *Mind-Energy, Lectures and Essays*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 165.

What is clear from this quotation is the fact that moving mirror-images of perception and memory deny the possible existence of the actual without the virtual, which is continuously splitting in the present the past and future.

Here it is necessary to explicate why Bergson is important for my discussion of sculpted matter. Firstly, Bergson's larger oeuvre continuously points to the problems in giving primacy to either scientific or metaphysical explanations of the relationship between matter and body. His attentiveness to the process of perception and conscious comprehension of matter in time, or *dureé*, also serves to emphasize the limitations of discursive interpretations of matter as that which is physical, material, spatial, divisible, and quantifiable—and, nothing more. Secondly, I agree with Bergson's argument that perception should be understood as a process which is maintained and sustained in matter, or "things themselves;" however, if we follow his argumentation further then it means that *actual images* or "things themselves" are located only in what Bergson calls *pure perception*. However perception as pure and removed from memory, or that *"which acts no longer*," can in fact *never* exist for it is always tied to duration as such. To make this point useful for my project I want to stress that to use the idea of memory we must fist locate it within the process of perception. To explain what I mean by this I want to go back to the artwork itself and my previous analyses.

While describing the different angles from which the sculpture can be viewed I was calling attention to the fact that the process of perceiving sculpted matter is conditioned and organized by the physical and material qualities of the stone block. A multitude of chance encounters with the compositional forms are given in the matter, so that each time the viewer moves to see the sculpture he or she is in fact participating in the process of perceiving the *infinito*. Memory in this case acts as that which continually unites, alters, and extends what is perceived of the sculpture through a durational and temporal process of seeing and engaging with the different viewpoints and angles, made available in matter, making visible the becomings of form. In this process memory and perception are durational; however, I would stress that memory should be understood as belonging to and contained within the process of perceiving the work and as something that helps the viewer piece together what they perceive of the different viewing angles into an understanding of the sculpture as a whole. In seeing the *Rondanini Pietà* the viewer's memory of the composition from a previous angle is challenged as he or she moves around; in this way it deters the comprehension of subject matter and prolongs the process of perceiving the work. Understanding the role of memory as such ensures that we do not repeat Elsner's descriptive process and allow memory of things that stand 'outside' the work to condition our experience and interpretation without first being attentive to the sculpture itself. Thus, we can keep memory as a useful concept to help us explain the ways in which the process of perceiving the sculpture relies on the viewer's participation in piecing the different viewing points.

In my description I pointed to the fact that the sculpture appeals to the viewer to see it anew through the forms that come into visibility and continually transfigure themselves through the *infinito*. Seeing and engaging with these forms suggests that the process is temporal particularly when we consider the indentations and chisel marks visible on the flesh of the marble. Time as temporalized is crucial for understanding the process of perceiving the becomings of these forms and the composition as it mutates through the viewer's embodied relation to it. Using the concept of *dureé* would overtly complicate this point; thus I think it is useful to think about Deleuze's concept of time. Furthering Bergson's project, Deleuze reformulates duration in terms that can be applied without giving memory the primary role in determining the being of matter. A brief discussion of Deleuze can help elucidate how temporality can be fruitful in determining the role of matter in perception.

In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze formulates his theory of time, which is indebted to Bergson's *durée* and the concept of temporality as a conflation of multiplicities of becoming. Deleuze explains that "the past and the future do not designate instants distinct from a supposed present instant, but rather the dimensions of the present itself insofar as it is a contraction of instants."[158] Understanding the present as a temporal moment in time that conflates all past and future moments within it, Deleuze explains the dimensions of the temporal as being in constant flux, conceptualized as a tripartite synthesis of time. Moreover, Deleuze argues, "the present is the actual image, and its contemporaneous past is the virtual image, the image in a mirror,"[159] which opens up to the present by the very nature of its temporality to a third synthesis that "unites all the dimensions of time, past, present and future...and concerns only the future."[160] This third synthesis produces a caesura that blurs dichotomies between time and space, and subject and object. By underscoring the importance of future within the synthesis of past and present moments Deleuze is in fact locating the potential for change, freedom, and will within the caesura that splits the subject and object positions.

Thinking about the present as that which is in constant becoming has greatly influenced the ways in which I see the temporal nature of the *infinito* to function in the *Rondanini Pieta*. Having used the concept of becoming in my analysis of the chisel marks visible on the surface of the marble I am calling attention to the process of time. Within my discussion of the sculpture I have also pointed out that the sculptural forms, including the compositional features of the two figures, are in the constant process of transformation through the course of perceiving the sculpture. I have chosen to explicate their becomings as a kind of continual process that transfigures the sculpture anew, where time is about a possibility of

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[158] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 71.

[159] Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989), 79.

[160] .Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 115.

chance encounters with sculpted matter and form. Highlighting this potential of change, time becomes a crucial determinant of how the sculpture works by prolonging and deterring the comprehension of its subject matter.

As I have argued, the concept of the *infinito*, like time, cannot be 'located' *in* the work; instead it is that which continuously blurs moments in time by binding matter to form. The synthesis of temporal moments is created by the viewer's role in perceiving the minute becomings of form enfolded in the flesh of the stone—forms that themselves call attention to the different phases of sculpting by emphasizing the nature of the medium itself. Thus the mutable becomings of form, facial features, chisel markings, musculature and penetrating surfaces are given in matter. Matter and form are enfolded in such a way that the subject matter itself is ambiguously in a state of becoming.

Bergson's reconceptualization of matter as memory-image and Deleuze's theory of the synthesis of time are useful in thinking about the process of perceiving sculpted works in time, rather than in space. However neither of these philosophical traditions can explicate the relationship between matter and form in ontological terms that can stand in opposition to the Cartesian tradition. Positing time as having an ontological primacy in the subject-object relationality is an important step in countering *res extensa*. The blurring of subject and object (viewer and sculpture), however, must be conceived in more foundational terms where the subject's perception of matter and form is secondary to the *being* of matter and form— that which solicits and organizes the viewer's acknowledgement of its being. To complicate this further, I want to consider Husserl's project on perception and then turn to Heidegger's writing in some detail.

Following Bergson, Husserl gives (sensory and embodied) perception a crucial role in mediating the relationship between form and matter in terms that give primacy to a phenomenal and experiential process of perception. For Husserl, as Rafael Winkler explains, "[what] fills space is the matter,"[161] so that "when perceiving an object tactually and visually, its surface, corner or edge, [the object's] 'spatial form', is both felt and seen."[162] Furthermore, "in tactile perception the roughness or smoothness of the surface, its tactile 'matter', is also felt, while in visual perception the color of the surface, its visual 'matter', is also seen."[163] The *virtual image* of matter in Bergson is here reconceived in terms that constitute a possibility of knowing the phenomena of matter more fully.

Form and matter coincide through apprehension that is fragmented and made whole through intuition since, as Husserl writes, "each body must have a location in intuition; each body is, as a matter of principle, given in intuition only as oriented."[164] Moreover, form and matter become ''one identical

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[161] Rafael Winkler, "Husserl and Bergson on Time and Consciousness," in *Analecta Husserliana* XC (2006), 97.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Quoted in Winkler, 97, from, Edmund Husserl, *Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907, Collected Works*,

body, merely covered or filled in a manifold way."[165] This is a significant point because he is thinking of form and matter as being relational and unified. However sculpted matter, due to the traces registered in its materiality, demands a particular involvement from the viewer—that is different, and yet similar, to how things are perceived in space and time. Bergson made this point when he discussed perception as existing in matter. Heidegger's attentiveness to the ontological being of a thing is helpful in bridging this gap between subject and object in a way that does not take away the agential quality of things themselves, nor disregard the role of the subject.

For Heidegger the distinction between form and matter, coupled with the subject-object dichotomy, is a "conceptual schema which is used, in the greatest variety of ways, quite generally for all art theory and aesthetics."[166] However, it is the technical idea of formed matter and not the Aristotelian concepts alone that Heidegger mistrusts:

> The self-contained block of granite is something material in a definite if unshapely form. Form means here the distribution and arrangement of the material parts in spatial locations, resulting in a particular shape, namely that of a block. But a jug, an ax, a shoe are also matter occurring in a form. *Form as shape is not the consequence here of a prior distribution of the matter. The form, on the contrary, determines the arrangement of the matter.* Even more, it prescribes in each case the kind and selection of the matter—impermeable for a jug, sufficiently hard for an ax, firm yet flexible for a shoe…. As determinations of being, accordingly, matter and form have their proper place in the essential nature of equipment…[however, they are] in no case *original determinations* of the *thingness* of the mere thing [emphasis mine].[167]

By denying that the matter-form dichotomy is the essential quality of the artwork *as* thing, Heidegger is critiquing the Cartesian definition the concepts, stating that "if form is correlated with the rational [*res cogitans*] and matter with the irrational [*res extensa*]; if the rational is taken to be the logical and the irrational the alogical; if in addition the subject-object relation is coupled with the conceptual pair form-matter; then representation has at its command a conceptual machinery that nothing is capable of withstanding."[168] To determine the ontological definition of the work of art *as* a thing, Heidegger denies the definition of artwork as representation that signifies a conceptual frame and points to the artist as its creator. Utilizing the term *techne* Heidegger explains the essential quality of art as something that was created; however, its 'createdness' does not depend on the fact that it was created by an artist. Accordingly, if understood as being dichotomous the concepts of form and matter can only give a technical definition of art.

Vol. VII, ed. and trans., Richard Rojcewicz (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), 257.

[165] Quoted in Winkler, 97, from, Husserl, *Time and Space,* 64.

[166] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Collins Publishing, 2001), 15-86; 27.

[167] Ibid.

[168] Ibid.

Heidegger denies the "current opinion…[that] the definition of thingness of the thing as the substance with its accidents…correspond[s] to our natural outlook on things."[169] This is a crucial point because matter and form in the Cartesian tradition conceives of matter as accidents and appearances. Instead, for Heidegger the matter-form structure becomes essential for being of equipment. Moreover, he explains:

> The matter-form structure…by which the being of a piece of equipment is first determined, readily presents itself as the immediately intelligible constitution of every entity, because here man himself as maker participates in the way in which the piece of equipment comes into being. Because equipment takes an immediate place between mere thing and work, the suggestion is that nonequipmental beings—things and works and ultimately everything that is—are to be comprehended with the help of the being of equipment (the matter-form structure).[170]

According to Heidegger the matter-form structure is not the essential or ontological quality of the work of art; however it does figure into its being. Because 'unconcealedness' of truth (of being) is the ontological phenomenon of the artwork, for Heidegger intuiting its *thingness* (and createdness) does not depend on the matter-form dichotomy. Since the nature of art is "the truth of being setting itself into work," for Heidegger the unconcealedness of truth is not determined from the artwork's aesthetic qualities and it does not depend on the particularities of the artist (that could be defined as anything that pertains to the subject such as intentionality, style, or biography). While this paper cannot take-up a larger discussion of Heidegger's definition of truth, or *aletheia* related to the thingly nature of the artwork, his reevaluation of the matter-form structure is important as it emphasizes the restrictive nature of the concepts. However, these terms are limiting only when they are understood as being in a dichotomous opposition to each other, as posited by Descartes. If for Heidegger the matter-form dichotomy is not an ontological quality of an artwork it is due to the fact that as a dichotomy they belong to the Cartesian tradition. Going back to the Aristotelian theory of the concepts, Heidegger's lectures on the oeuvre of this Classical philosopher reveal that they are useful to understanding being as such.

In his early work on Aristotle and prior to the writing on the work of art, as Walter A. Brogan explains, Heidegger was extremely attentive to the relation between form and matter, or *morphe¯* and *hule¯*.[171] Heidegger's re-reading of Aristotle is crucial as it posits matter and form as having an ontological twofoldness that constitutes being as such.[172] Importantly, the ontological quality of matter is thought of in terms of potentiality, or *dunamis*, and is explicated as that which is turned towards form. According to Heidegger, form as *eidos,* "toward which a being moves," is also given in the potentiality of

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[169] Ibid., 23.
[170] Ibid., 29.
[171] Walter Brogan, *Heidegger and Aristotle* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 82-92.
[172] Ibid., 90-2.

matter. The twofoldness of matter and form constitute *ousia*, "the beingness of beings"—that which is presencing. As I have emphasized in my discussion of the *Rondanini Pietà*, the potential of chance encounters with form enfolded in matter is characteristic of how the sculpture works to solicit the viewer's engagement and make it overtly temporal. This potential, however, rests in the relationship between the viewer's process of perceiving the *infinito*, which forestalls and prolongs the process. The presencing of matter is given in the perception of the becomings of form and the potentiality of seeing the sculpture anew as the viewer moves around. These concepts (presencing and potentiality) are useful for thinking about the visibility of sculpted matter.

For the purposes of this thesis, the brief Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* suggests that a reversal of the Cartesian dichotomy is possible through a consideration of the ontological nature of matter and form as properties that are inseparable—either physically or theoretically. While this idea furthers Bergson's claim that matter is not quantifiable, and thus divisible, it also negates the possibility of conceiving matter and form separately from its *telos*—"for the sake of which" sculpted form and matter come into being as twofold: as subject matter. Heidegger does not propose that form and matter are ontological qualities of an artwork; instead, he posits the idea of a thingly nature of art. However, I would like to suggest that the relationship between matter and form is an essential and ontological quality of sculpture. In addition, much like Bergson and Heidegger I see the two as having a reciprocal relationship and not a hierarchical one as Descartes proposed.

Going back to the Aristotelian question of being via the concepts of substance, matter and form is necessary for an in-depth discussion of sixteenth-century art theory on sculpture. Furthermore, the long tradition of Aristotelianism and Platonism in Medieval theology and (natural) philosophy has to be considered in relation to the establishment of new schools of thought in the early modern period. As I have argued above, fifteenth and sixteenth-century art theorists sought to integrate the concepts of matter and form as ontological qualities of art, which served to distinguish artworks from other objects and things occupying the perceptual field of the viewer. This context itself might have been enough to explicate the importance of thinking about the rhetorical qualities of sculpture in terms of matter and form. Nonetheless, the reason for outlining the philosophical tradition in some detail serves the purpose of calling attention to the ways in which sculpted matter has not been given due diligence in methodological approaches taken up by art historians discussing sculpture more generally. However to bridge the philosophical discourses outlined above, in particular the concept of time and the ontology of matter and form, it is necessary to turn back to the *Rondanini Pietà*.

44

The *Infinito*: Perceiving the Temporal Enfolding of Matter and Form

As sketched out in the earlier sections of the thesis, fifteenth-century art theorists, such as Alberti, fused Aristotelian optics with the Platonic theory of art as *mimesis* in order to define and argue that art had a rhetorical quality that could imitate the ideal visible in nature and posited the value of technical and mechanical mastery of art. As a result, they argued that through sensory perception, form and matter—in painting or sculpture—can have a rhetorical and thus, a social function akin to other liberal arts. By the sixteenth-century, translations of Aristotelian philosophy prompted new theoretical definitions of art, which were not restricted to *mimesis*. In positing that art has the ability to perfect *upon* nature, as seen in Varchi's D*ue lezzioni*, the gap between nature and the ideal reproduced in art was widened so as to expand the visibility of art. Importantly, the concept of the *infinito* introduced in this thesis to discuss the *Rondanini Pietà* can account for the ways in which the visibility of sculpted form and subject is negotiated through its matter. These discourses are markedly different from the methodologies established by modern art historians who segregate *matter*, repeating the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and body. By placing matter in the realm of the body the Cartesian tradition disallows matter from having any cognitive or perceptual qualities—qualities that I have argued are essential to the visibility of sculpted medium.

The historiography of Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà* outlined the problems of interpretation as they pertain to biographical, iconographic, and aesthetic frameworks. The discussion of these approaches served to emphasize the ways in which the sculpture challenges our conceptions of Michelangelo's larger oeuvre. Because the sculpture is formally different from Michelangelo's 'completed' works, due to the visibility of the *infinito*, scholars opt for discussing it in terms of artistic intentionality utilizing a biographical approach and label the work as *non-finito*. Determining the formal qualities to be static elements of the work—by segregating matter—allows the sculpture to be judged in aesthetic terms. In turn, the sculpted form is emphasized apart from sculpted matter. In contrast, my visual analysis of the work emphasized that in the *Rondanini Pietà* the matter and form comes to be mediated by the *infinito*.

By poignantly implicating the viewer, the *infinito* deters any easy comprehension of sculpted form and subject matter by insisting on the visibility of sculpted matter—its substantial quality. Because the material and physical nature of matter is made visible through the *infinito* the sculpted form and subject matter are enfolded into the spatial and temporal field of perception. It is the nature of sculpted matter that makes particular demands on the viewer; thus, through its segregation, modern art historians are able to formulate their discussions of sculpture in terms that deny the complexities embedded in perceiving sculpted form and matter. Considering the ontological relationship between matter and form is important for explicating how sculpture works as a medium more generally.

The relationship between form and matter in the *Rondanini Pietà* is made perceptible through the temporal nature of the *infinito*, which cannot be 'located' in the work. Rather, it is a feature of the work that makes a particular demand on the viewer; by acting like flesh on the surface of the marble it intricately binds the roughly chiseled indentations to what they infer: the bodily contours of the two figures. The fleshiness of the sculpture suspends the conflated moments in time, which correspond to the sequential processes of sculpting and the multivalence of forms that can be discerned by the viewer. The sculptural three-dimensionality is thereby invigorated by the fact that the *infinito* functions to temporize the viewer's participatory role, revealing the chiseled outlines and making animate the indentations and markings on its surface. The agential nature of materiality given in sculpted matter is made visible in the temporally mutable chisel marks that deter an instantaneous image of its subject matter. As I argue, sculpted matter is not static, flat, or easily determinable because it contains physical qualities that establish its presence in relation to the viewer and organizes how the subject matter is given in form.

A vertical and gravitational pull in the figural compositional emphasizes the frontal nature of Christ's body. The inconsistencies of formal and proportional elements of the figural shapes serve to call attention to the status of his body, which is at times indistinguishable from the contours that delineate the figure of the Virgin. Thus the subject matter is ambiguous not simply due to the uncertainty its iconographic repertoire, since it is possible to perceive the work as a pietà, a Man of Sorrows, a Deposition, and an Entombment. Rather, these possibilities are made available by matter and form; they are brought into being by the embodied and perceptive nature of the viewer's process of recognizing the temporal visibilities of the sculpture. It is the viewer who has the ability to interpret and comprehend the subject matter; however, as I argue, what comes prior to this is the enfolding of matter and form which organizes the perceptive and embodied relation to the subject matter—one which is not determined by iconographic specificities.

Understanding how and what of the subject matter is given in matter and form leads to a more nuanced analysis of the *Rondanini Pietà*, while emphasizing its contingencies. Conceptualizing the *infinito* in terms of what is made visible in the composition—the body of Christ—allows the work to be contextualized in discourses that pertain to how the sculpture works. In order to put my own theoretical framework to test, so to speak, I want to suggest a way for recontextualizing the work. The tenuous discourses on the Eucharist in the Reformation period present the most relevant context for thinking about the ambiguities of subject matter made visible in the *infinito*.

Conflating historical and theological time (past, present and future) the sacramental offering and receiving of Christ's body by the devout is a crucial act in the promise of salvation. Amidst the Reformation, Catholic theologians had to describe and define the sacramental nature of change in the Eucharistic rite. Prior to 1552, the establishment of the dogma of the Eucharist, the Aristotelian theory of

substance as matter and form were utilized to explicate the transubstantiated change from the consecrated material of bread and wine into the immaterial matter, the body and blood of Christ. The dogma in fact denied the long-standing use of Aristotelian concepts and posited that this change is mysterious and not substantial. The Protestant denial of 'real presence' of the body of Christ in the Eucharistic sacrament was consequential as it denied that salvation was given in the substances received by the communicants.

Putting salvation into question by negating the sacramental change, Protestant discourses posed serious contradictions to theology necessitating a complete break from all previous explanations of the Eucharistic rite; most of these explanations served to counter heretical movements tied to diverse interpretations of concepts in philosophy and developments in natural sciences. Keeping this discourse in mind I do not want to suggest a conclusive interpretation of the work, but to point to the ways in which doing so would in fact deny the sculpture its rhetorical quality. The Eucharistic discourse is pertinent only in so far as it places the work within a context that allows me to argue that any interpretation of the subject matter is dependent on the viewer's participatory role in discerning the visibility of becomings of form suspended in sculpted matter.

As Paoletti has emphasized in his study, the body of Christ in the *Rondanini Pietà* calls attention to this discourse in terms of its compositional and iconographic complexities. The body as made present to the viewer by the standing figure of the Virgin parallels the sacrificial offering evoked in the Eucharistic rite in a way that overtly emphasizes its bodily, material and physical nature. However, I want to suggest that this presencing is not only given in the subject matter. Rather, it is imbued in the temporalities arrested in the flesh-like surface of the marble negotiating the viewer's relation to the body. Emphasizing the futural becomings of form, the sculpted matter in the *Rondanini Pietà* acts to make present for the viewer the body of Christ and with it the possibility of salvation. The physical and material qualities of the work highlight its affective nature by insisting on making the process of perceiving the subject matter overtly temporalized.

The visibility of *infinito* animates the subject matter in a way that hinges on the viewer's participatory role in discerning the forms, contours, markings, and figures that continuously transfigure themselves through the very process of perceiving the interdependency between matter and form. How the viewer comes to understand and interpret the subject matter through this process depends on his or her own willingness to become part of how the sculpture works. The rhetorical quality of the work—that it moves the viewer—and the interpretive process that determines how we understand its subject matter is overly dependent on the viewer's role in perceiving the *infinito*. As a result, the *infinito* made visible in the *Rondanini Pietà* challenges us to rethink sculpture as a medium more generally by calling attention to its ontological being—the enfolding of matter and form.

FIGURES

Fig. 1. Michelangelo Bounarroti, *Rondanini Pietà*, 1552-1564. Marble, ht. 195cm. Castello Sforzesco, Milan. Photo by author.

Fig. 2. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; detail of hand from the protruding arm. Photo by author.
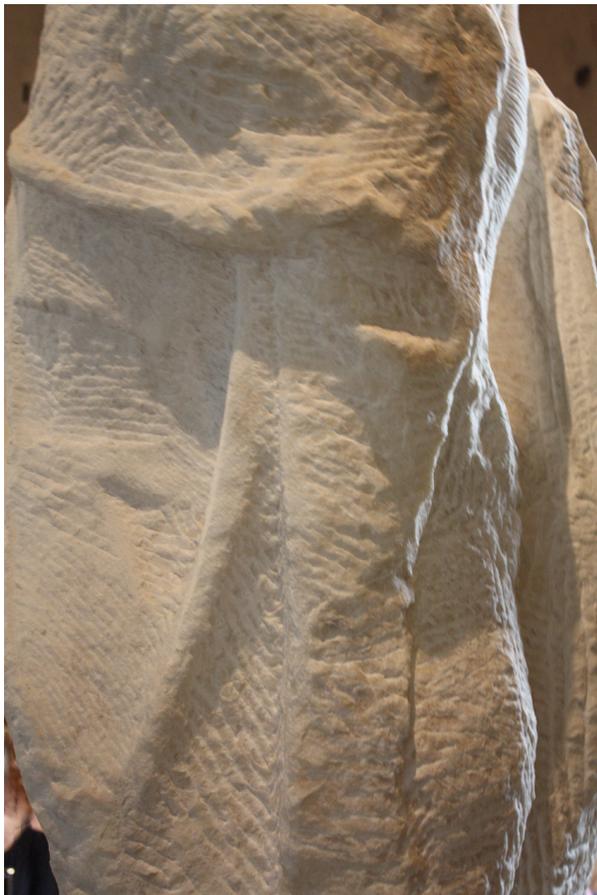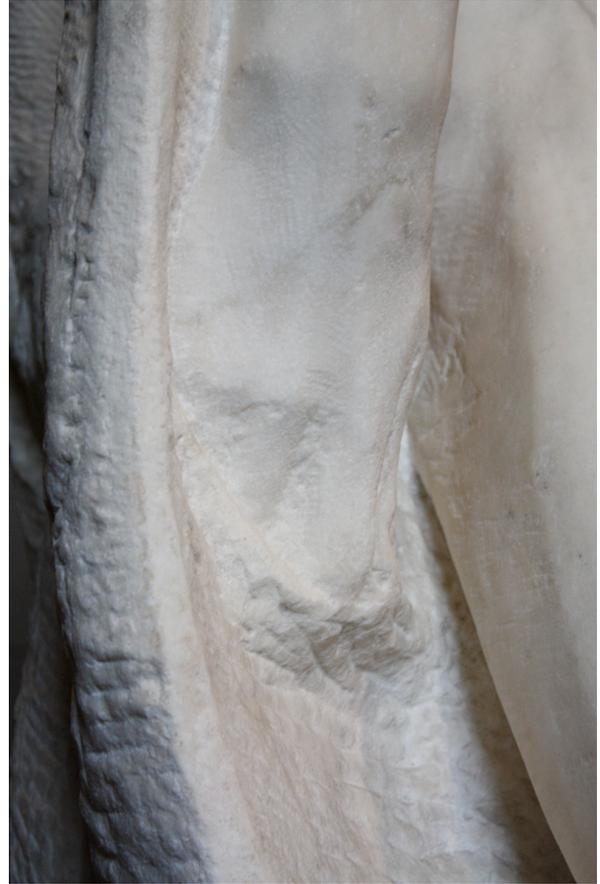

Fig. 3. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; detail of Virgin's back. Photo by author.
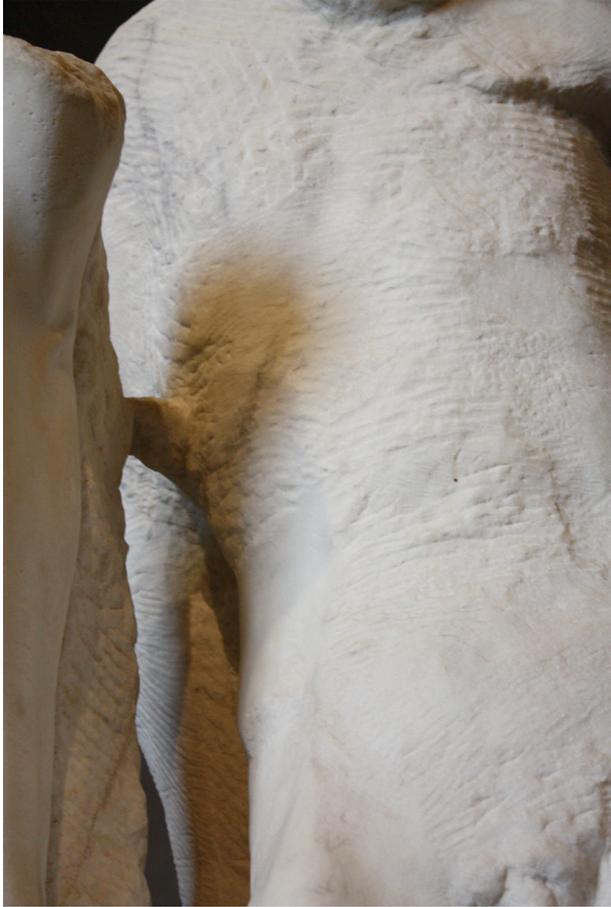
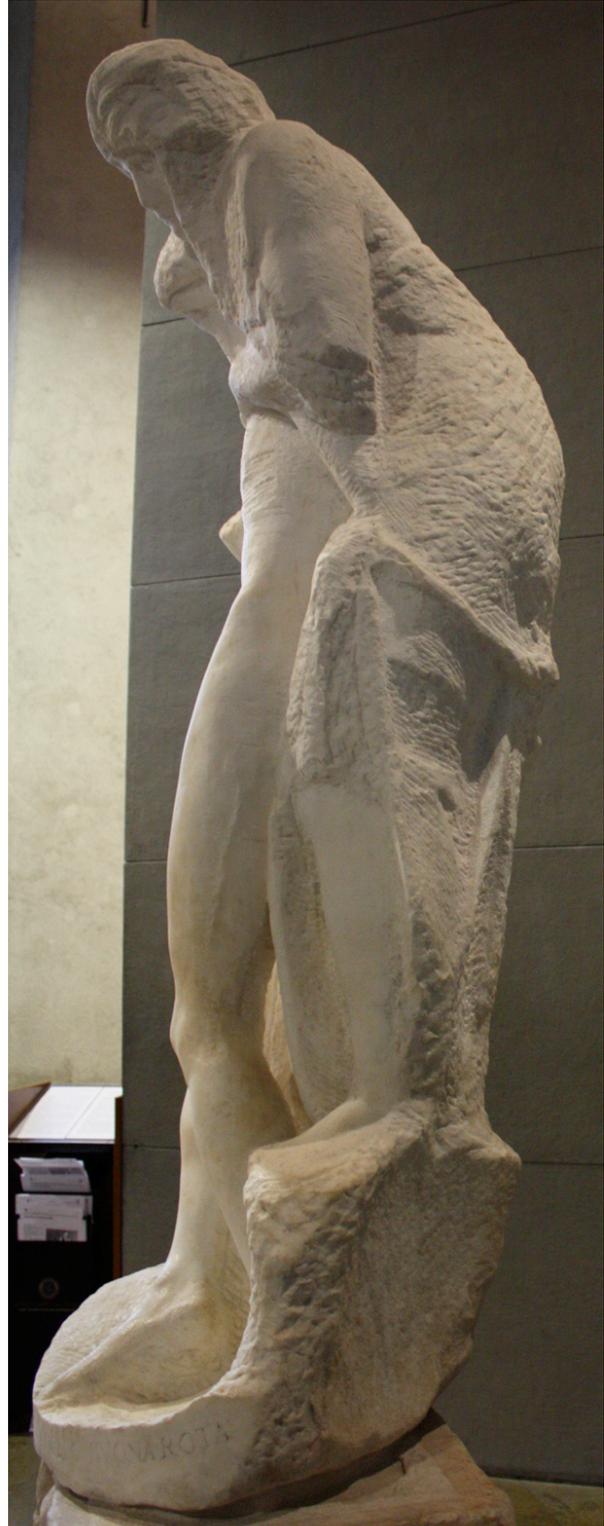**Fig. 4.** Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; detail of Christ's torso. Photo by author.

Fig. 5. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; detail of Christ's legs. Photo by author.

Fig. 6. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; detail of back viewed from the left. Photo by author.

Left: **Fig. 7.** Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*. Photo by author.

Right: **Fig. 8.** Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; viewed from the right. Photo by author.

Fig. 9. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; viewed from the back. Photo by author.

Fig. 10. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; viewed from the left. Photo by author.

Fig. 11. Michelangelo, *Florentine Pietà*, 1550-1552; viewed from the right. Marble, ht. 226 cm. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence. Photo by author.

Fig. 12. Michelangelo, *Florentine Pietà*; viewed from the front. Photo by author.

Fig. 13. Michelangelo, *Florentine Pietà*, view from the back. Photo by author.

Fig. 14. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*, detail of initials 'MGR' on the base. Photo by author.

Fig. 15. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; close-up view of the protruding arm viewed from the right. Photo by author.

Fig. 16. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; detail of figures from the right. Photo by author.

Fig. 17. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; detail of Christ's feet. Photo by author.

Fig. 18. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; close-up view of figures. Photo by author.

Fig. 19. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; close-up of Christ's legs. Photo by author.

Fig. 20. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; close-up of figures' heads viewed from the left. Photo by author.

Fig. 21. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; view from the back. Photo by author.

Fig. 22. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; two views from the left. Photo by author.

Fig. 23. Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*; detail of Christ's legs viewed from the left. Photo by author.

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