Romaine Brooks' Self-Portrait Photographs and the Performance of Lesbian Identity

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Between 1910 and 1915, American artist Romaine Brooks produced an extensive group of self-portrait photographs. For those familiar only with this wealthy expatriate's 1923 self-portrait in oils, these little-known photographs are a startling departure. An astonishing variety of poses, costumes, and moods replaces the monumental and implacable presence of the later painting. The 1923 work, with its powerfully androgynous articulation and confrontational engagement, is almost universally interpreted as Brooks' attempt to visualize a lesbian identity within the profoundly homophobic and patriarchal post-World War I European culture.[1] While they are radically different both in conception and medium, these pre-war photographs also address the difficulties of being a lesbian in Europe. In these photographs, Brooks negotiates a visual lesbian self-identity within a culture based on normative heterosexuality that refused to see homosexuality except as disease and psychological inversion, and that proscribed erotic love between women. Although she was financially insulated from the utter social catastrophe other women faced, Brooks nevertheless confronted the nearly insoluble problem of visualizing a lesbian identity in a culture systematically attempting to erase that possibility.

This article will concern a single set of about 20 self-portraits that include several in which Brooks carefully builds the composition around her own painted portraits of her lover, Ballet Russes dancer Ida Rubinstein. (Figures 1-2) In these as in other photographs, Brooks repeats her image of herself, affecting small changes in posture, directional glance and costume. She also provides a surplus of visual mechanisms that proliferate and multiply inside the images, including eyes, mirrors, and cameras. This abundance of image-making mechanisms underscores the fact that, through the photographic process, Brooks submits her image to the powerful regime of the visible and its organizational strategies. By emphasizing the means by which bodies are made to appear, are presented and re-presented to be seen, Brooks' pictures explore what it is possible and impossible to see within this ideological frame. With their promises of visual plenitude, Brooks' self-portraits challenge the truth-value seemingly guaranteed by photography's reputation as a faithfully documentary medium, while her insistent repetitions of images, objects and bodies implicitly question the stability and uniqueness of such identity formations. The dizzying spectacle of excess patterns, reflections, and surfaces suggests complete visibility but also calls attention to the status of photographs themselves as surfaces, as reflections that obscure an equally dizzying absence, the void of an already unrecoverable subject lost to time and distance. Thus Brooks' photographs structure identity as a negotiation of the visible and the invisible and articulate self-identity as the experience of loss. More precisely, Brooks stages the continual and active disappearance of the supposedly "essential" self within the purely visual economy of the photographic medium. I focus on Brooks' gendered play with the status of woman's body and on the nearly invisible lesbian sexuality that haunts the background of these images to argue that Brooks' photographic self-portraits pursue the possibilities and limits of a visible lesbian identity.

Throughout this project I engage a theory of identity understood as performance, a theory informed by recent theoretical work by Peggy Phelan and Judith Butler. Phelan's recent book *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* investigates the "traps of visibility" as they have impact upon contemporary efforts to fashion identity. Her text is also a cautionary investigation into the effective limits of an identity formulated solely to gain increased cultural visibility for a previously under-represented community; in other words, a visibility politics that equates identity with a more inclusive representational landscape, the end goal of which is to participate fully inside the visible.[2]

A critique like Phelan's recognizes that dominant paradigms of power / knowledge and their organizing structures have the ability to absorb and incorporate a certain amount of "visible difference." In the particular case that interests me, for Brooks and her contemporaries, part of the problem was precisely the increased scrutiny, the enforced visibility, under which cultural authorities placed them in an effort to "see" their sexual orientation. To submit themselves to the visible was to risk surveillance by medical and psychoanalytic discourses that perceived these women as perverse others, transforming them and their

[1] See for example Susan Gubar, "Blessings in Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists," *Massachusetts Review* 22 (1981): 477-508; Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1986) 304-307; Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace, *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (Im)Positionings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 31-56.

[2] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) esp. 1-33.

relationships into objects of study and therefore subject to diagnosis and "correction." Brooks' most productive artistic period, from about 1910 to 1930, coincided with a growing interest in specifically female homosexuality. The opening paragraph of Sigmund Freud's "Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," published across Europe in 1920, demonstrates the ominous import of these traps of visibility.

> Homosexuality in a woman, which is certainly not less common than in men, although much less glaring, has not only been ignored by the law, but has also been neglected by psychoanalytic research. The narration of a single case, not too pronounced in type, in which it is possible to trace its origin and development in the mind with complete certainty and almost without a gap may therefore have a certain claim to attention.[3]

One doesn't have to look very closely to see the implied threat that this statement contains, as Freud invokes both the authority of juridical law and normative science. Freud's ideas, and the sexological texts to which they are indebted, had an increasing cultural influence and also had immediate material consequences for women trying to navigate this cultural terrain. Offering themselves to cultural visibility, therefore, was at best a risky proposition for Brooks and others, one that had no guarantees of being seen, and consequently understood, any differently. This risk creates a certain rhetorical charge in all of Brooks' efforts to address lesbian sexuality and specifically informs her visual approach in these self-portrait photographs.

As Phelan and others have noted, an identity politics invested completely in increased visibility also ignores the constitutive power of what cannot be seen, "marked," or identified. Dominant (heterosexual) European culture in the early 20th century worked to render visible so-called sexual deviance and thus bring it under a normative control. Anxieties about homosexuality in general, and about lesbianism more specifically, lay precisely in the fact that it continued to elude the organizing gaze of science and psychology. The necessary reliance these disciplines had on visible signs of this perceived deviance suggests the underlying fear that deviance could not be seen at all. Freud's own words belie this anxiety, as he concedes that female homosexuality is perhaps "much less glaring" and that his own case is not too pronounced in type (therefore, perhaps not totally reliable). The threatening invisibility of homosexuality exerted a powerful grip on the cultural imagination, a point doubly important to assert in the case of female homosexuality, since generally women were less visible in dominant culture anyway, and thus lesbians could be a doubly invisible specter at the margins of heterosexual desire.

Phelan's work on performance helps to investigate questions of identity and cultural recognition. In a related concern, Judith Butler examines the relations between performance and regulatory power as it impacts the individual performing body. In *Bodies That Matter* she defines performativity not as a singular act but as a "citational practice,"[4] a process of repetition that slowly gains cultural authority. She argues that through cultural threats such as banishment, psychosis, and death, individuals are compelled to reiterate certain norms at the expense of others, which she calls "inarticulate." So performance is implicated in the very process that sets limits of what has value within a given cultural framework. To take up a rejected position, to move completely outside the norm, a subject risks utter cultural unintelligibility. However, Butler argues that since every citation is both "an interpretation of the norm and an occasion to expose the norm itself as a privileged interpretation,"[5] then every citation, reiteration and repetition has the potential to shift the terrain of intelligibility, to open up or fracture the smooth masquerade of universality that typifies cultural domination. Because Butler believes that "the regulatory norms of 'sex' work. . .to normalize sexual difference in the service. . .of the heterosexual imperative,"[6] citational performance offers specific strategies for "queering" (as she puts it) identities—of opening up new possibilities in the compulsory and forcible production of embodied subjects. I find this concept of performance useful as a general theoretical frame and have extended it to help articulate the particular vector of Brooks' project. In these self-portrait photographs, Brooks cites many visual norms—among them the conventions of fashion, the female nude, and the erotics of the artist and model—in her attempt to visualize a lesbian self-identity.

The photographs under discussion belong to the series of nearly 20 pictures taken in Brooks' Paris studio on the fashionable Avenue du Trocadero. In most of them, she appears seated on a sofa before a heavy, floral-patterned curtain, wearing a small black hat and a dress of rich silken material with a high standing collar (Figure 1). Brooks playfully and attentively varies her poses, her costume, and the position and framing of the camera. While some of the repetitive character of the series can be attributed to the photographic method itself with its multiple exposures, Brooks seems to be especially interested in precisely that repetitive process, which she exploits to explore the seemingly endless permutations that the performing body can assume. With their careful arrangements and strict attention to details of gesture and pose, these photographs are steeped in general conventions of feminine social grace and propriety as informed by the further conventions of fashion photography.[7] Thus Brooks positions the camera as a substitute for the watchful public eye. As both photographer *and* photographic

3 Sigmund Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press) 147.

4 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 2.

5 Butler 108.

6 Butler 2.

7 At the time she took these pictures, Brooks had for several years been friends with influential fashion photographer Baron de Meyer and his wife Olga. It is likely that her association with the de Meyers sparked

subject, however, her relation to that camera is more complex, and the insistently repetitive nature of the series underscores a relation between image and identity that Roland Barthes argued is unique to photography. As he so succinctly stated it in *Camera Lucida*, "the referent adheres." In other words, "a specific photograph is never distinguished. . .from what it represents."[8] With these self-portraits, Brooks attempts to undermine this tautology of image and subject, to demonstrate that the photographed body is never completely identical to its captured image. By emphasizing the artifice of portrait photography, Brooks instead implies that a gap always obtains between the two. Whatever the photograph represents, it is already lost to time and place and is therefore literally unrecoverable outside the photograph's visual frame. As the subject of her own pictures, Brooks also accents the inevitable alienation and self-division that occurs in any attempt at self-portraiture, defeating the "fiction of simultaneity" so crucial to photography's operation.[9] Instead she produces multiple versions of her image, each one an interchangeably viable image of her "self." In these pictures Brooks uses the photographic process itself to reconfigure the relation between self-identity and visible image.

When she moves to the center of her studio and photographs herself in a mirror, Brooks affirms this intention and adds a new level of visual and conceptual complexity (Figure 2). She also considers the position of sexual desire within the visible confines of the photograph. Her camera enters the visual field not simply as a consequence of the technical requirements necessary to achieve this shot. Brooks carefully centers the camera within the mirror to vividly underscore the perceived similarities between the camera and the mirror as objectifying image makers. The often-used term "mirror of nature" suggests that, because of the unique relation of image to referent, photography had been granted a kind of truth-value as a purely imitative and documentary medium.[10] As early as the mid-19th century, psychiatrists and pathologists routinely used photography to capture and record mental or physical disturbances, supposedly objectively. But Brooks undermines the assumed objectivity of the photograph as well as the camera's ability to render its object of study completely visible. For in these pictures, the camera does not image Brooks directly, it only captures her reflection in the mirror. Her corporeal body lies somewhere outside the frame. As a purely mechanical device, the camera's dispassionate relation to its object supposedly reveals an essential body and therefore a knowable physical presence. But Brooks makes clear that what the viewer sees is an image framed by the photographer's lens, and also that what the camera actually captures is an apparitional reflection of the body developed in the emulsion. She suggests that the camera's and the mirror's relation to the body is marked by a gap that can never be filled and in which the subject has room to move. In an endless regression, the camera reflects itself reflected in an image that it (re)duplicates and inverts. Despite the camera's visual hold on the subject, hyperbolically dramatized here, the embodied subject, Brooks, has nonetheless effectively disappeared into her illusionistic projection.

In briefly describing the central photograph of the sequence in Figure 2, two French authors note what they call its two "points of flight."[11] A reference to the picture's compositional structure, the term highlights the complicated spatial play around Brooks' centered figure. The space extends behind the mirror and to the far wall of the studio in one direction, while in the other, reflects in the mirror and continues over her (and the viewer's) shoulder. For these authors, the concept of "points of flight" simply acknowledges Brooks' formal complexity and technical accomplishment. But I like the phrase because it suggests again an active disappearance, an attempted escape—a subject in flight from its own image. Brooks looks at and for herself in the mirror, and her search sets up the picture's organizing lines of sight. But when she looks, as her gaze flies from her eyes, she does not see her own face looking back. At the terminus of Brooks' points of flight in either direction is not her own reflected image, but the body of her lover Ida Rubinstein.

The two paintings that divide Brooks' attention and capture her fleeing gaze are both large scale nudes. On the left in the background is the allegorical *Woman with Flowers*, and on the right reflected in the mirror is *Le Trajet*, or in English *The Crossing*, in its unfinished state. (Figure 3). There is no reproduction available for *Woman with Flowers.* They are only two of several images of Rubinstein's body that Brooks produced during their relationship, which lasted until the outbreak of World War I.

Ida Rubinstein's body had, for several years, been an important French cultural commodity. Debuting in Paris in the 1909 Ballet Russes production of *Cléopâtre*, Rubinstein stunned audiences in the title role. However, their astonishment had nothing to do with her dancing skills, but rather her dramatic entrance. Rubinstein's Cleopatra, wrapped like a mummy, was carried onstage inside a sarcophagus on a funerary bier. What followed was an elaborate, ritualized dance in which her atten-

her interest in photography, and it is interesting to speculate on the degree of their professional involvement in light of the extreme visual sophistication of these images.

8 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 5-6.

9 Frederick Garber uses this term in his discussion of self-portrait photography, in *Repositionings: Readings of Contemporary Poetry, Photography, and Performance Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995) 166.

10 Henry Fox Talbot titled his pre-eminent 1840s text on photography "The Pencil of Nature." See *Henry Fox Talbot*, ed. Mike Weaver (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1992) for documents and discussions related to this issue. Craig Owen's essay "Photography *en abyme*" helpfully elucidates the relation of photographs to reality, with specific reference to self-portraits and mirrors. In *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992).

11 Blandine Chavanne and Bruno Gaudichon, "Romaine Brooks Photographe," *Romaine Brooks*, ex. cat. (Poitiers: Musée Sainte-Croix, 1987) 71.

dants slowly unwound her binding swaths one by one. Cleopatra gradually emerged from this swirling vortex of fabrics until the skeins finally fluttered away to reveal Rubinstein's inert, totally motionless, and "divine body, omnipotent in its beauty."[12] The astounded young Jean Cocteau gushed that her "unforgettable entrance. . .must be recorded for all time."[13]

Rubinstein soon left the Ballet Russes and quickly gained a reputation, not as a ballerina, but as a mime. Performing alone or with a company, her expressive gestures so mesmerized French audiences that in 1912 an entire book appeared dedicated to elegiac descriptions of her lyrical movements, accompanied by elegantly abstracted line drawings of her body.[14] Rubinstein's fame reached its apogee in 1911 when she appeared at the Théâtre Nationale de l'Opéra in the gender-bending *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, in the lead role of the Roman centurion killed for his pious Christian devotion. The work scandalized and titillated Parisian audiences on many levels, not the least of which was the nearly impenetrable tangle of erotic possibilities—as a woman played a heterosexual male saint adored by a homosexual Roman emperor, in a part written specially for her by male Italian poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, who was widely believed to be her lover. Even before its debut, the play and performer were the talk of the city, because the work's subject matter had prompted the Archbishop of Paris to forbid Catholics to attend the show under threat of excommunication.[15]

Reviews of the production clarify the terms of French audiences' adulation for Rubinstein. She was highly praised for her poetic, graceful movements and the pathos of her expressive tableaux. One critic rhapsodized:

> If you didn't see her in the first act, immobile and ecstatic, with suffering in her entire body, then climbing to Calvary, and later tied to the trunk of a tree where she will receive the final thrill of her expiring life, you will never know just what beauty the formal play of a human body can achieve.[16]

In addition, most male reviewers seemed inordinately preoccupied with her legs, however, Rubinstein was almost equally universally criticized for her dialogue. Critics denounced her strong Russian accent, claiming "she roll[ed] her 'r's' over gravel,"[17] and lampooned her intonations as coarse, loud, and guttural. Apparently, Rubinstein's appearances were only truly successful when her body remained speechless, untainted by language. When the body spoke, it destroyed an otherwise seamless theatrical illusion and a successful masculine erotic fantasy.

According to Brooks, the two women met after the first performance of *Saint Sebastian*. Although whispers of Rubinstein's lesbianism existed, public acknowledgment was impossible, particularly at that moment, when Rubinstein had both a shadowy marriage of convenience and several high-profile "protectors," including d'Annunzio. Even thirty years later, in her unpublished autobiography, Brooks would only say guardedly that Rubinstein "did not or rather could not return d'Annunzio's affection."[18] Thus it was through her own imaging of Rubinstein that Brooks traversed this dense matrix of bodily desire and representation to make her claim to Rubinstein's public body. And her photographs that contain those paintings explore the dynamics of visibility and identity that informed their clandestine relationship.

The central photograph invokes a long tradition of artist and model imagery to suggest an underlying erotic relation between the two women. A brief comparison to Henri Matisse's 1903 *Carmelina* demonstrates both Brooks' dependence on convention and her revisions of that norm to reflect the circumspect nature of their relationship. Both works organized the studio space around artists reflected in mirrors and nude female models. Matisse's strictly frontal presentation of Carmelina stresses her passive acceptance of the painter's gaze, and the mirror cleverly reunites the pair in an intimate and private space. Brooks reverses the positions of the two figures, substituting her own cloaked and reflected image for Carmelina's frank sexual availability. In addition, although the two women are also reunited within the mirror, Brooks appears not with the actual model but with her own self-produced images of her lover. Rubinstein's nude form floats in the background, remote and increasingly inaccessible. The change in medium, the divided and reflected nature of the picture, and Rubinstein's presence only in painted representation attenuate but still never completely obscure the erotic connection that structures these images of model and artist.

The portraits contained in the photograph, in particular *The Crossing*, reaffirm that as Brooks cites and re-cites Rubinstein's body, she trades on the same cultural accessibility to the muted body of the performer. Her nude portraits are deeply embedded in the prevailing paradigm that surveyed that body. In her autobiography, Brooks herself refers to Rubinstein as a "femme fatale,"[19] and her paintings rely heavily on contemporary aesthetic conventions that associated female sexuality with danger

12 Alexandre Benois, quoted in Michael de Cossart, *Ida Rubinstein: A Theatrical Life* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1987) 16.

13 Jean Cocteau, "Notes on the Ballet," *The Decorative Art of Léon Bakst*, ed. Arsène Alexandre (London: Fine Art Society, 1913) 27.

14 Georges Tribout, *Dessins sur les Gestes de Mlle. Ida Rubinstein* (Paris: La Belle Edition, 1913).

15 The Archbishop's edict characterized the performance as "offensive to Christian consciences" and accused the play of "disfiguring the history of one of our most glorious martyrs." *Comoedia*, May 18, 1911.

16 *Comoedia*, June 11, 1922.

17 *Journal des Debats*, May 29, 1911.

18 Romaine Brooks, *No Pleasant Memories*, unpublished manuscript, National Archives of American Art, Washington, DC, 257.

19 Brooks 257.

and death. Rubinstein's stage appearances as Cleopatra, as the sultan's treacherous wife in *Schéhérazade*, and also as Salomé only reinforced such an identification specific to her sexualized body.[20] In one sense, *The Crossing* and the other nude portraits can be seen as asserting an even more privileged claim on Rubinstein's public body, since they cast off the armor that hid the androgynous body of Saint Sebastian and unravel the final skeins that covered Cleopatra. Brooks also included these works in her first one woman show in 1910-1911 at the prestigious Galeries Durand-Ruel in Paris and the Goupil Gallery in London. Through their exhibition, she both extended the circulation and availability of Rubinstein's form while simultaneously confirming her own privileged relation to it. However, in claiming a position within this predominant representational framework, Brooks irrevocably altered its borders and made possible a new kind of looking—the specter of a female visual homoerotics. Critics' reactions to these works reveals an uneasy, if barely acknowledged, recognition of Brooks' subversion. The *London Times* reviewer, for example, after praising other portraits as "direct, simple, and attractive," wondered disparagingly

> why. . .Mrs. Brooks seem[s] to prefer the disagreeable and the decadent, the long thin nudities of three of the pictures [two depicting Rubinstein] and the ugly mystery of one of them, the *Masked Archer* [Brooks' wryly ironic revision of Rubinstein's *Saint Sebastian*]?[21]

According to this critic, Brooks' "exercises in morbidity" function improperly within the usual visual rhetoric of the female nude generally, and Rubinstein's form in particular. And while these images participate in the continued accessibility to and interpretation of Ida Rubinstein's body in representation, Brooks never presents that body as fully captured by sight. For instance, in this painting, the ambiguous title *The Crossing* evokes the multiple gazes and sexual politics that play back and forth across the surface of Rubinstein's preternaturally white skin. But Brooks also exhibited the painting under the title *The Dead Woman (Femme Morte)*. Transformed into a corpse, "the crossing" alludes to the point at which identity gives fully over to the invisible, in the passage from life to death. This tension suggests that even as the physical body of Rubinstein becomes completely available to vision, the interior identity it contains will never be recovered or revealed. So whether Rubinstein's body is lost to death as here, or hidden under its veil of allegorical trappings as in *Woman with Flowers* or the *Masked Archer*, Brooks' representations of that body simultaneously assert its visible presence within representation and reaffirm its absolute otherness.

Incorporating these paintings into her self-portrait photographs, Brooks' search for self-identity plays itself out on the body of the other. Yet she presents that body as triply inaccessible—caught by the photograph, caught in the mirror, and caught within the paintings. Therefore, despite the multiplying imagery, Brooks' organizing look still fails to overcome the gap and master that other. Significantly, the corporeal body of Brooks' lover is totally absent from this image. Although she is continually cited, Ida Rubinstein remains outside of and continues to exceed the frame of this visual construction of the self.

Peggy Phelan argued in *Unmarked* that

> identity is discernible only through a relation to an other. . .declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration of identity, there is always loss, the loss of not being the other and still needing that other for self-completion.[22]

It is precisely this loss that structures Brooks' photographs here, her points of flight—a subject already lost to itself, a subject already lost to and in an other, and both already lost to representation. Moreover, this loss is also identity lost in a powerful system of visibility that does not allow or overtly acknowledge erotic desire between women. So desire emerges only obliquely—in a certain pictorial structure and in an insistent repetition, fragmentation, and allegorization of women's bodies. This loss is not an occasion for mourning, however. While excluded by dominant paradigms of visual knowledge, the nearly invisible specter of lesbian identity and subjectivity nevertheless retains the power to haunt the limits of vision. As Brooks disappears into her own self-image, this loss forces us to recognize that identity emerges in representation's failure to accurately and completely communicate meaning.

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[20] Rubinstein appeared in the Ballet Russes' *Schéhérazade* at the Théâtre Nationale in 1910 and had previously caused considerable controversy in her 1908 St. Petersburg production of *Salomé*.

[21] *London Times*, June 17, 1911.

[22] Phelan 13.

Figure 1. Romaine Brooks, *Self-Portrait*, *c*.1911. Courtesy of the Musée Saint-Croix, Poitiers, France.

Figure 2. Romaine Brooks, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1911. Courtesy of the Musée Saint-Croix, Poitiers, France.

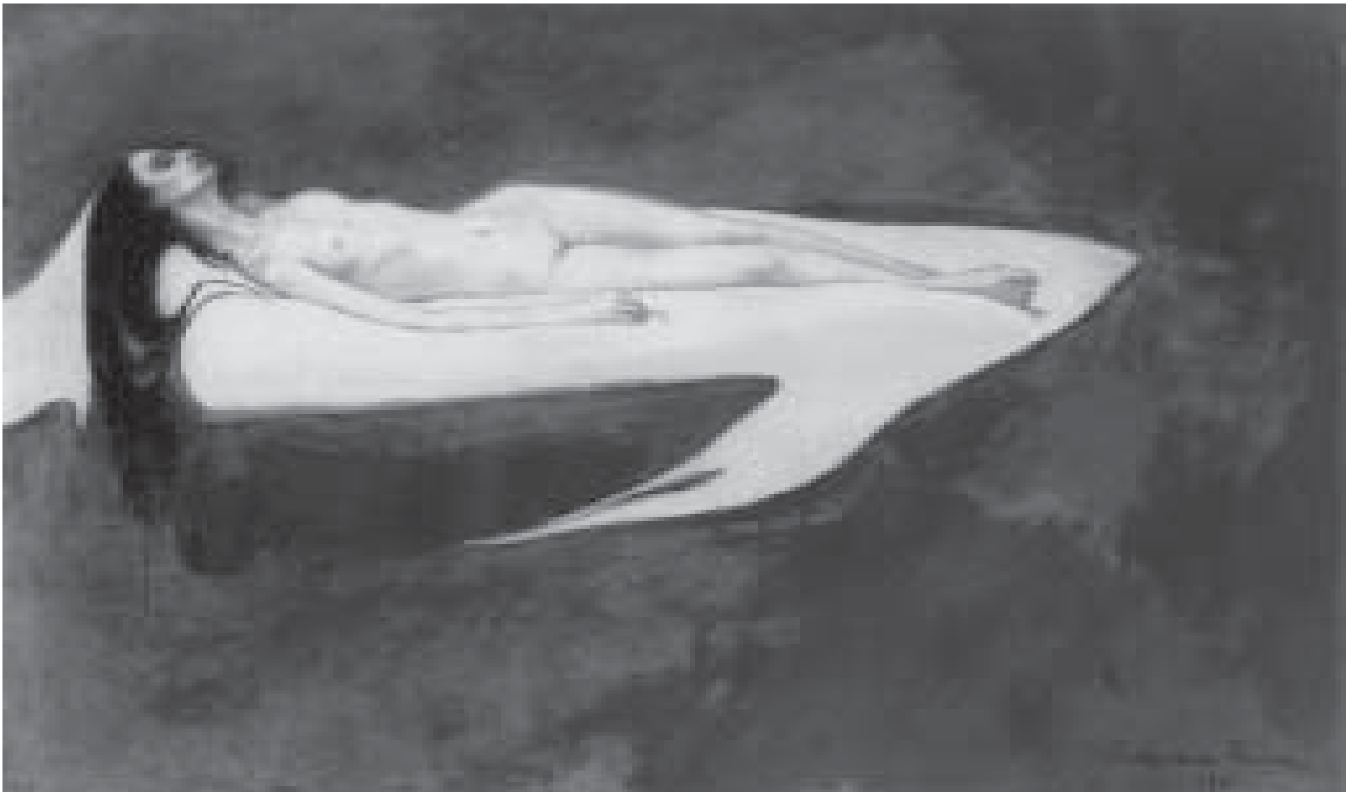

Figure 3. Romaine Brooks, *Le Trajet (The Crossing)*, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.