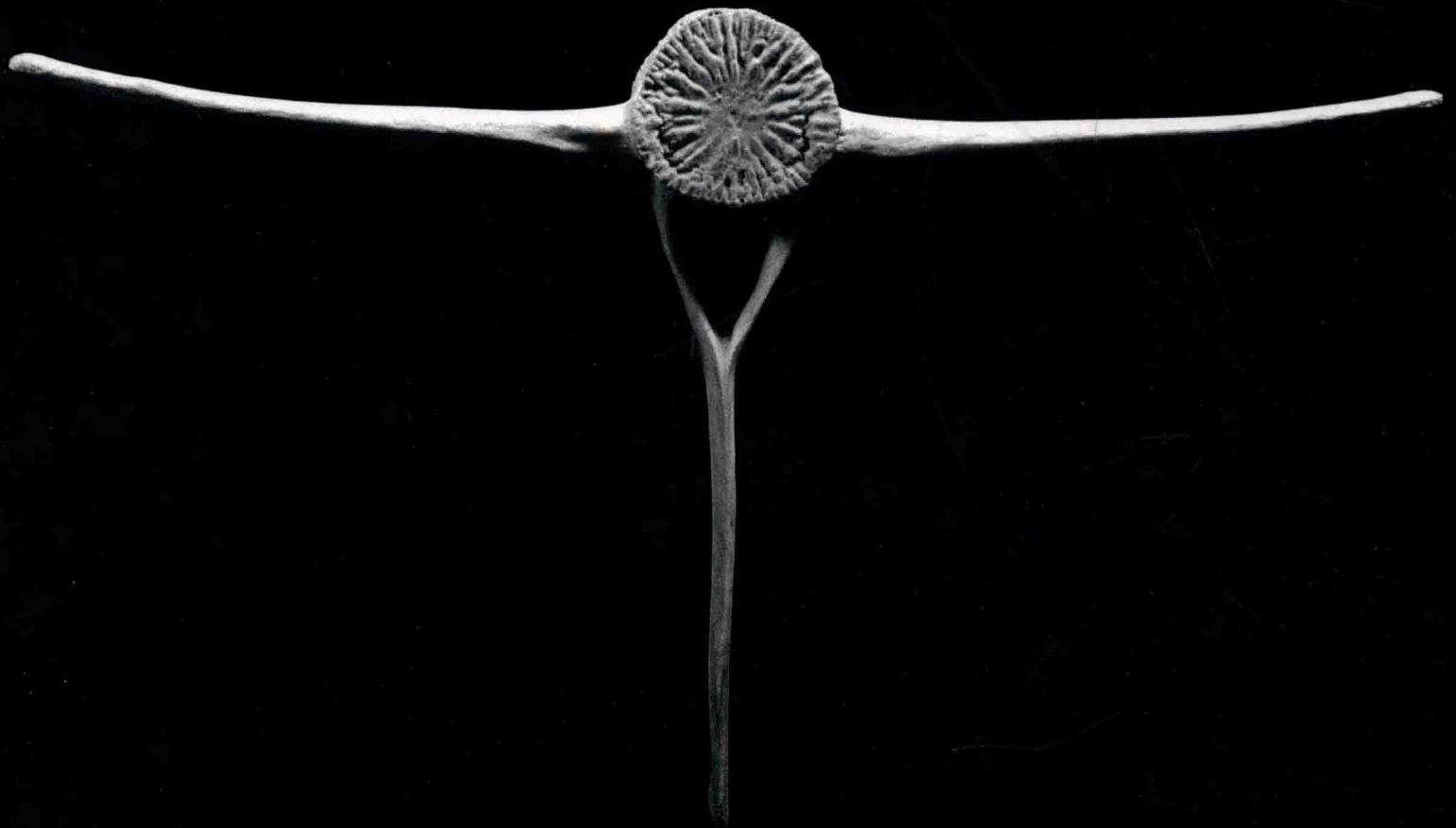


# CHARLOTTE PERRIAND *and photography*

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## A WIDE-ANGLE EYE

Jacques Barsac



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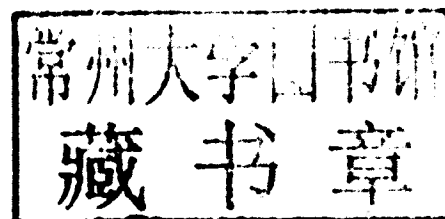
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## A WIDE-ANGLE EYE

Jacques Barsac

Preface  
Alfred Pacquement

Introduction  
François Cheval



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CONTINENTS

*Charlotte Perriand and Photography. A Wide-Angle Eye* was written to accompany a series of exhibitions on Charlotte Perriand's photography. The exhibitions were held at the Museum für Gestaltung, Zurich, *Charlotte Perriand, Designerin – Fotographin Aktivistin*, 15 July–24 October, 2010; at the Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-arts de la Ville de Paris, *Charlotte Perriand, de la photographie au design*, 7 April–18 September, 2011; and at the Musée Nicéphore Niépce, Chalon-sur-Saône, *Charlotte Perriand et la photographie*, spring 2012.

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musée Nicéphore Niépce

Based on Charlotte Perriand Archives, Paris,  
curated by Pernette Perriand-Barsac



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COVER  
Fish vertebra, 1933

BACK COVER (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT):  
Passenger on a boat, 1937

In Savoy, ca. 1930. Photographer unknown

Sandstone on the sand, ca. 1935

Swivel chair, LC 7, 1927

Shaped low table, 1953. Photographer unknown

Girder bridge, 1933

Locust logs, 1933

COLOUR SEPARATION  
Eurofotolit, Milan

Printed in Italy by Grafiche Flaminia, Foligno (PG)  
in February 2011

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Unless otherwise stated in the captions,  
all photographs and furniture are  
by Charlotte Perriand.

All old prints and negatives come from the Charlotte  
Perriand Archives. Contemporary prints were made  
from the original negatives by Sylvain Charles  
from the Musée Nicéphore Niépce.

Apart from a few photographs of Art Brut,  
Charlotte Perriand did not print her own photographs.  
The titles have been given by the author and  
the Charlotte Perriand Archives for the sake of  
convenience. Uncertain dates are preceded by "circa".



## Acknowledgements

This book, like all my books on Charlotte Perriand, is due to my closeness to Pernette Perriand-Barsac, who threw herself generously into the adventure and cooperated with enthusiasm, over and above the valuable work she does in the archives.

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I am grateful to François Laffanour, who for many years has worked faithfully and skilfully to make Charlotte Perriand's work known in his Galerie Down Town, and to Gianluca Armento, who endows the furniture of the past with a new future, and to Gilles de Courcel, Yves Bouvier and Alexandra Dubourg, who have supported this work in various ways.

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This book develops the initial exploration of Charlotte Perriand's photography by Alfred Pacquement and Marie-Laure Jousset for the retrospective of her work at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 2005. Heartfelt thanks.



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# Modern!

Alfred Pacquement

Director of the Musée National d'Art Moderne  
Centre de Création Industrielle  
Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou

One word says it all: modern. Charlotte Perriand was a militant of modernism, an attitude worth emphasizing these days for such projects are now rare. Social justice and better treatment for individual citizens were aims shared by many artists between the two world wars. Charlotte Perriand's work cannot be separated from her political vision. A free spirit herself, she claimed a new status for women. Her idea of interior design shaped by a new lifestyle ("homemaking") is expressed down to the tiniest details of her furniture, which has an obvious social resonance. She invented a spatially economical home design in which functionality was just as important as aesthetics and a careful choice of materials. While she met the demands of many patrons throughout her career, she belonged to a generation in which a handful of "moderns" were somehow the pioneers of the new worldview. Her intuitions are anchored in our everyday lives to the extent that a large part of our environment is indebted to her.

Charlotte Perriand was therefore immersed in a milieu of progressive design whose daring innovations were informed by a political and a social project. Even if they formulated their own approaches in their various fields and insisted on their differences (sometimes sparking violent quarrels), these designers belonged to the same family and shared the same aims. Rethinking society, lifestyles and everyday aesthetics was the heart of this family. Almost the only woman in a largely male domain, Charlotte Perriand was nonetheless a major player. This inevitably drew attention to her work, but greater energy and daring were required for her to take part in the "new spirit" which animated art and design between the two world wars.

When I met Charlotte Perriand, I asked her about her relationships with the painters and sculptors of her time. I knew, for example, that she had met Fernand Léger, Miró and many more and I wondered what artistic affinity there had been between them. She immediately said "photography" and talked of the photographs of the 1930s that she mentions in her autobiography, *Une vie de création*. She obviously had tender memories of her rambles with Pierre Jeanneret and Fernand Léger in search of pebbles or

pieces of flint: ready-mades lifted out of their natural environment, carefully described in technical notes and recorded on sheets of contact prints. "Our haversacks were filled with treasures: pebbles, bits of old shoes, wood with holes in it, horsehair brooms, rolled and polished by the sea. Fernand and I sifted through them, admiring and photographing them, dipping them in water to make them shine. That is what we called art brut." Later she talked of rubbish dumps, but this time she photographed piles of crushed industrial waste. The photographs sometimes show formal affinities with the furniture she designed, such as a table top in the shape of a piece of flint or the smooth outline of a bone echoed in a piece of furniture. A sort of vocabulary of forms. Charlotte Perriand's photographs are working drawings as much as plastic research. This private material, long kept secret and first revealed to the public by an exhibition in the Pompidou Centre in 2005, is abundant and diverse enough to be given its rightful place in the construction of her oeuvre.

Photography, along with the cinema, is the modern art par excellence. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed great experiments in this field by the Russian Constructivists, the Surrealists and the Bauhaus. Wanting to associate the "noble" disciplines with more directly functional research, the Weimar school gave photography a decisive place. Most of the avant-garde of the time promoted photographic techniques. Germaine Krull published the album *Metal* in 1928. Many artists emphasized its importance: "The camera alone seems able to reproduce modern life" (Rodchenko, 1928); "Only photography can give an image of the straight lines of modern techniques, the sky-borne latticework of cranes and bridges" (Albert Renger-Patzsch, 1937). Its appropriateness to the industrial world became clear while "the methods of representation inspired by the painting of past periods and ideologies are disappearing and being replaced by a mechanical procedure of representation" (Moholy-Nagy, 1927). It is not surprising, even if the coincidence is significant, that Charlotte Perriand photographed the transporter bridge at Marseilles, an industrial object that fascinated

many contemporary artists from Moholy-Nagy to Man Ray, but also interested architects and builders because of its structure. Or that her first experiments included shots from her rooftop studio in the Place Saint Sulpice, framed in a manner very much in vogue among avant-garde photographers of the time. Nor is it surprising that she did not show them during her lifetime. She used her camera as a notebook in the way a draughtsman in the classical period sketched plants, landscapes, or everyday objects. Photography had not yet entered our museums, even if very great artists used it, and it was still far from being considered an art in its own right. Furthermore it was not her main activity; it belonged to the private world of her studio, a choice that in no way detracts from its importance within her work as a whole.

Fernand Léger again: the painter of “modern pop art” exhibited his “Objects” in 1934. The show included numerous drawings of pieces of flint alongside quarters of meat, roots, clothing...floating on the sheet, sometimes directly related to photographs of the same or similar pieces of flint taken by Charlotte Perriand, as can be seen in the illustrations in this book (see pages 182–92). An almost perfect example of the complicity between the two artists.

What these photographs show, apart from affinities with other artists, is a plastic sensitivity to natural forms and materials such as wood. But they also testify to a poetic dialogue with matter, which puts natural materials and

industrial techniques on an equal footing. We know that Charlotte Perriand was as skilled with wood as she was with metal. She used steel tubes and bamboo, aluminium and plywood, and was as much at home with precious timber as with economical materials intended for mass production.

But she did not confine herself to private jottings about the real world. She also used photographic procedures in architectural projects in the form of monumental photomontages in a deliberately militant context during the heyday of the Popular Front. She used them to draw attention to the sordid side of the city in “La Grande Misère de Paris” at the housing fair. Then she spotlighted the rural environment in her decorations of the waiting-room in the Ministry of Agriculture, in what was a doubly audacious move considering the political and architectural environment. For the Agriculture Pavilion at the World Fair she worked with Fernand Léger again, in a joint effort to focus attention on people and social progress. There again, photomontage was an extremely modern practice that used the collage technique invented by Braque and Picasso to associate images with a political message, as the Dadaists had first done. The fact that Charlotte Perriand used photomontage or photography for large-scale public murals shows that she cannot be identified solely with the furniture she designed, emblematic of the period as it may be. Her home design expresses a wish for a better lifestyle and aspires to a fairer world. Charlotte Perriand’s use of images in her photographic research testifies to this and sheds light on her entire approach.







# The Proletarian Soul and the Mystic Pebble

François Cheval

Chief curator  
Musée Nicéphore Niépce  
Chalon-sur-Saône

We continue to talk about the history of photography. We keep this fiction alive, regardless of the fact that our libraries hold only a few reference books, good and not so good, often fragmentary and always biased. Lately voices have been raised to attack an established model which daily proves to be inoperative. Our collections have demonstrated their poverty; there is so little research into concepts borrowed from elsewhere, commonly from art. The language of art, already hackneyed in its own field, is hard to apply to photography. It plies the coasts and takes the well-charted routes; it skirts but does not explore any new continents. Powerless and arrogant, it fails to grasp the complexity of the world and its objects, working with a vocabulary and grammar that are not up to the task. Roland Barthes said so years ago but we would not listen:

“Photography evades us. The various distributions we impose upon it are in fact either empirical (professionals, amateurs), rhetorical (landscapes/objects/portraits/nudes), or aesthetic (realism/pictorialism). In any case external to the object, without relation to its essence, which can only be (if it exists at all) the New of which it has been advent; for these classifications could very well apply to other, older, forms of representation.”<sup>1</sup>

The market, museums and critics take the same approach to photography and the only glorious outcome attributed to the photographic object lies in its vintage, its value as a collector's item, a prestigious object outside history. Nothing which permits us to understand the spaces of reality. For this reason, Charlotte Perriand's photographic work has been relegated to the sunken world of singular productions and has no status.

But let there be no mistake, if this study of her work and its possible reassessment were to result in a broadening of the market, we would have failed. Anyone hoping for the invention of a new artist and waiting expectantly for original material to emerge with a view to speculating on the rarity of the prints will be disappointed by this book.

The re-emergence of this collection of photographs, some never published before, prompts us to change the way we look at things and its close scrutiny is a precious aid in learning to do so.

Charlotte Perriand deliberately chose formal simplicity, clarity, legibility and lack of adornment in her photographic expression. These sets of images convey and give access to a particular concept of life. In a dynamic presented from the outset as radical, pressing the button is no longer the decisive moment in the creative act. The aptness of the image—these days we talk of meaning—legitimizes its provenance. In her studio, filing boxes were filled haphazardly with agency photographs, magazine clippings (from *L'URSS en construction* in particular) and shots taken by her photographer friends (Nora Dumas, Ylla, Kollar). An image bank classed by themes introduced a new language, at odds with author status. Subordinating the documents to the argument led to a fundamental break in these years and a rare exploration of the medium. The refusal of subjectivity and the denial of the ego contributed to a renewal of values and meaning, which transformed aesthetic and political practices.

Photography, like architecture, became a collective process. A sympathiser and a militant for a while,<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Perriand shared the Communist intellectuals' distrust of the “petit-bourgeois” notion of a work of art, the fascination with signature and the thirst for recognition.<sup>3</sup> The mass-produced aspect of photography therefore appealed to her, fanned by her knowledge of the mechanisms of industrial production.<sup>4</sup> The organization of mass production required standard image formats and a visual unity that owed its punch to the process of cutting, enlarging and adding poetry and statistics.<sup>5</sup> Everything that enriched the argument was welcome. The compartmentalization of artistic practices was merely the consequence of the insistence on clarity, simplicity and directness in art that claimed to be revolutionary. Despite her empathy for the proletariat and its fate, Charlotte did not feel obliged to adopt the stifling proletarian academism of Socialist Realism.<sup>6</sup> There was no other remedy for this fatal illness than deliberately separating the intention and the object. In this discipline, she was well schooled. She had met El Lissitzky and the Vesnin brothers on her trips to Moscow and Moholy-Nagy was on board the *Patris II* with her on the voyage to Athens.<sup>7</sup> Her photographs were clearly influenced by Constructivism, which she later combined with social reporting and documentaries in her photographic friezes.