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Meetings with sculpture

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When I was a small boy I would often accompany my father on his walks through the woods of Zurich. On one of these excursions, still during the Second World War, we went to call on the stone sculptor Hans Aeschbacher, who, later, with Bodmer, Linck and Luginbühl represented Switzerland more than once abroad at the biennials and international meetings. We found him while he was working outside. On the edge of the wood there was a wooden hut, his refuge and workshop. It was a torrid, sunny day in summer and the blows of the hammer on the chisel in the working of a high stone of tufa rang out near and far. You could hardly hear any other sounds and one spoke little. From the unworked stone appeared, already clearly recognisable and decipherable, a female image which he affectionately called «Marieli». In the shade of the trees was a wooden keg of bitter new wine placed on a crude easel which was offered to guests during the pause from work.

There was a brief discussion of art and of how the work begun a few weeks ago was proceeding. My father asked when the work was foreseen to be finished. The sculptor in reply struck the keg with his hammer, intending to express in this laconic way that as this was still half full so the stone figure had only half been chiselled from the stone and that it still lacked the essential. And with this he continued his work and we our walk.

More than ten years after this meeting, I was then living in Paris, I began my personal walks. One evening late I was lingering among the regular nocturnal customers at the Café Dôme on the boulevard Montparnasse and was observing the continual coming and going along the covered terrace of the café. Without me noticing, a person sat at my table, certainly for lack of other free places, a shabby figure in whom, with not a little surprise and emotion, I recognized Alberto Giacometti.

Naturally I knew, from the writings of Genet and Sartre, that he frequented that place, but I could never have imagined that he would sit right at my same table. Should I have spoken to him? I tried, calling up all my courage, and he became cheerful to have met a young fellow country-man. He asked me what my intentions were and told me first in French and then in German of his latest visit to the Louvre and he spoke to me of his observations about a late Hellenic statue, of its position in space and of its immediate nearness. Then he invited me to accompany him to his workshop. There we spoke less and less and soon the fact that he had taken up his work again induced me to take my leave. The next morning in the Louvre I looked for the sculpture which we had discussed without being able to completely grasp the problem posed. Following this meeting and my visit to the Louvre I found in a library various catalogues of the early Thirties with illustrations which revealed to me how the then contemporary sculptured works came to be presented. Strange to say, they were displayed as if they had been paintings along the walls of the exhibition rooms. This arrangement forced the observer into a frontal relationship and forgot the challenge of the great sculptors of the past, that is the fact that the image sculptured from stone had to consist of at least three sides.

Another time, about twenty years later, crossing the new world, coming from New York, I went to

call on the American artist Donald Judd in Marfa, Texas. Only two years earlier, in 1976, we had constructed with two carpenters the five volumes in spatial relations enclosed by panels of chipboard conceived for the five successive spaces of the ground floor of the Kunsthalle in Bern. Each one of the wooden forms, similar but arranged differently, were four feet high, positioned in the corresponding space of four steps back from the respective four walls. One could say «a sea of chipboard», in order to express a first sensation.

In Marfa and in 1978 on the other hand, everything was in movement and at the beginning of a surprising undertaking which claimed to be called architecture and in those days, that is a few weeks earlier, it had got going on the way towards its provisory completion. The enthusiasm of the artist amazed me, his joy in moulding the most simple things, the most necessary in the house and round about in a way which was familiar to me through the activity of a carpenter, well known to me in that he was my grandfather. Rough planks, beams and long nails: up a stair of this type whose height amounted to a quarter the height of the house, he led me to the floor above under the roof to show me works by Chamberlain and Andre. Climbing up from below, with the floor of the upstairs space on a level with my eyes, I discovered something truly extraordinary from the optical point of view, at first not immediately identifiable and that reminded me of the fauna in the neighbourhood of Marfa, steppe-like and lacking in trees. Reaching the next step and then the one after I recognized iron rods for reinforced concrete, very twisted as if they had been abandoned near a builder's yard, more elements positioned to form an irregular line: *14 Steel Wire Run* records the catalogue of the sculptures of Carl Andre.

After the exhibition of the sculptures of Andre (1975) and Judd (1976) and before that of Chamberlain (1979) in the Kunsthalle of Bern, I tried in the spring of 1979 to clarify further for myself this problem through new experiences, for example, the comparison between the verticality of Matisse (*Nue de dos I-IV*) and Giacometti (*La jambe*) with the horizontality of Andre. Finally we could see and experiment the *Nus de dos* of the «peintre-sculpteur» in a new context and within our spaces.

George Baselitz also accepted the exhibition and the challenge and certainly he has been the only one. Even today in his winter workshop four wooden containers are lent against the walls. In the enclosure formed by these rectangular containers positioned facing upwards there is insulating material of a white colour which can be cut and worked without difficulty with an incandescent metallic wire. The first of the four forms shows initial traces of clay applied by hand and thumb on the white preformed material. The innumerable and clearly perceptible thumb imprints led the artist to doubt the work in front of him, not however the theme and so he looked for a great trunk, he had it sawed down and he himself took the hatchet. His intention was: «Model of a sculpture». The result would be presented at the Venice Biennial the next year (1980) in the pavilion of the Federal Republic of Germany, certainly, having in mind the provocation of Beuys in 1976. Wood shows life, its age, but also its tricks and trunks of great diameter are full of many secrets and extraordinary things. At the end of the winter 1979-80 there were two vertical forms in the workshop obtained from two trunks, but also the cycle of eighteen paintings inspired by Masaccio known afterwards by the title *Images of the road*. The work seemed finished and the artist departed for Italy. Instead of finding the peace he was looking for, he was slowly engulfed by an increasing restlessness and after a brief stop in Florence he was again travelling to return to his workshop. Both the sculptures were drastically cut, attached together and shortly afterwards sent to Venice. The outcome is well known and always more appreciated.