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Some notes about sculpture

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The misfortune of sculpture.

«What is sculpture? Sculpture is that thing into which one bumps while stepping backwards in order to see a painting better». That amusing assertion by Ad Reinhardt is something more than a mere ironic wisecrack about the difference between painting and sculpture and the superiority of the former. Beyond the specific reasons connected with the idea of painting of the American artist, resounds here the persisting echo of the unhappy criticism that has accompanied modern sculpture from, principally, the drastic negative judgement of Baudelaire, but which also has authoritative roots even in the Renaissance. Exceptionally lively, quite like part of a theatrical comedy, is the description of the differences between the painter's and the sculptor's work which can be found in Leonardo's *Trattato della pittura*. While the painter «with great ease is sitting well dressed in front of his work and moves the very light brush», in a clean room, in silence or accompanied by beautiful music, the sculptor, sweating and «all covered with marble dust so as to look like a baker» works in a filthy place and in a continuous clang of hammers. By polemically opposing the activity of the painter who «conducts his works with greater effort of the mind» to the «entirely mechanical» way of the sculptor who uses «the strenght of his arms as well as percussion», Leonardo claims for the artist the status of intellectual and for figurative art that of «science» which exceeds the bounds of artisan practice. Unlike sculpture which is chained to the heavy and cumbersome physics of its constitutive materials, painting «on a flat surface, by dint of science, makes you see very large countrysides with remote horizons» and thus may widen as large as he wants his figurative horizon inside the virtual universe of the two-dimensions.

The position of Leonardo is in substantial concordance with what Baudelaire writes at the beginning of his commentary on the sculptures exhibited at the Salon de Paris of 1846, entitled *Why sculpture is boring*. For Baudelaire painting «is an art of great reasoning, which requests a special initiation in order to enjoy it», while sculpture which has far-off origins (all the primitive peoples were very skilled in engraving fetishes) and is much closer to nature, is «a Caribbean art»; in fact even the most ignorant countrymen may appreciate a piece of wood or a stone cleverly shaped, whereas they remain «stupefied in front of the most beautiful painting». Having left behind primitive times sculpture becomes, for centuries, a complementary art, functional to the great architectonic realizations, populating the structures of the cathedrals or the façades and the parks of palaces like Versailles. In the Salons, placed as isolated works, Baudelaire writes, sculpture becomes an art of the drawing-room or bedroom: «there are no trivials or trifles that the sculptor refuses for himself, winning «the comparison with all the calumets and fetishes». On the other hand there are also artists endowed with an exasperating universality, capable of anything: from the huge figures to match-holders, from jewellery to busts or low reliefs, whose function never goes beyond ornament or rhetoric celebration.

Directly linking himself to Baudelaire, without quoting him however, Carlo Carrà, in a text of 1923, makes things worse: «On the other hand, these are not its worst degradations. There is the sculpture of celebratory monuments, in the squares of the cities and of the graveyards, a downright industry of the corpse: a grotesque idea has bloomed in the rotten ground of modern fatuousness, an idea that too often has exempted its practiser from any kind of responsibility towards art».

In his considerations of the last years (1945) on sculpture, sometimes very self-critical, Arturo Martini accuses this art to be «dead language» and that it is to be still sclerotically linked with ancient and old-fashioned canons, because it is too much conditioned by its monumental and celebrative function, because its horizon «is still the pedestal where the usual reproduction of the model in the same three dimensions bows and dies». For him all modern sculpture «has been nothing but a fiasco or a failure» because it hasn't felt the need to become independent, to trespass the limits of the traditional three dimensions: everyone, in one way or another, has copied someone, the Egyptians or the Etruscans or the more moderns, «the puppets of the Easter Island», always arresting themselves however at the human fact. For not being sterile anymore sculpture will have to transform itself into a «plastic womb» expressing itself in space and no longer like a fact extirpated from it and put on a pedestal.

In such a direction Medardo Rosso and Umberto Boccioni have been the Italian precursors, in different ways; a new development of plastic work in space will be realized by Fontana. But, naturally, it is not only an Italian problem.

In any case the final breaking off with the classicizing or veristic academism so much deprecated by Baudelaire happens, in many ways, through the discovery of the values of primitive art, (the «Caribbean art») by the avant-garde exponents. Artists like Brancusi, Epstein, Gaudier-Brzeska, Derain, Kirchner try to characterize their works with the synthetic strength and the charge of primary expressiveness of the African and Oceanian sculptures, moving away for ever in a radical way from the «white world of plaster and marble populated with figures in theatrical poses»), using an effective definition of the official Salons given by Léonce Bénédite (*La sculpture*, part I, in «La Revue de l'Art», 1899) and to live autonomously in new spaces of creative freedom.

Life as a statue.

The people of the statues in marble and bronze are really quite numerous in the world and in particular in Italy. These marbled and bronzed sons of official historical memory, born in various centuries, even though they do not suffer from ailments, challenge by duty and by right the relentless pressing of time. Lodged in squares, streets and gardens (or relegated to churchyards), in dignified and silent immobility, strictly respecting the hierarchical positions they were assigned, they support with stoicism the rain, the hail-storms, the summer heat, the fog and even the most humiliating defecations of the pigeons, in order to be always ready to offer themselves to the glances of possible observers. Casual and inattentive glances, for the most part, as in the case of the largest category of monuments, those without any artistic charisma; obsessively fetishist, full of indiscreet and voracious tourist curiosity, as in the case of famous works of art, enough to sometimes fear for their own safety (the iconoclastic hammer of a new Toth is always in ambush). In this last category we find personages, like Michelangelo's *David* for instance, so famous that they can even afford to have a double appointed to occupy the outdoor position, thus enduring the inclemency of the weather and, unique comfort, enjoying themselves by often making fun of the ignorant and disinformed spectators. But, shut in a cage like a lion at the zoo, in his room in the Museo dell'Accademia, the real *David* looks back with regret, may be, on the noisy and vital day to

day life of the past when he wasn't yet definitively classified as «a museum piece». However, in its present indoor position, this statue stands out like a splendid alienated giant whose plastic strength appears more intense, now that the spatial ratios have been changed.

The existence of equestrian monuments which have firmly resisted on their pedestals in the centre of the main squares is altogether glorious and rewarding. On the back of potent horses having an incontestable virility, the *Colleoni* in Venice, the *Gattamelata* in Padoua, the *Farnese* in Parma, *Emanuele Filiberto* in Turin, honour their craftsmen in the same way that they are proud of the name they bear, looking down on the swarm of people and cars around them. Only the founder of this select family, the old Marco Aurelio of the Campidoglio, corroded by bronze cancer has gone to restoration running the risk of leaving his place for ever to a double, too.

In the case of this kind of monumental élite, such a process of personalization is carried out by everyone so, it can be said, that, we are no longer in front of a representation but in front of the personage himself whose real story in the past is not as important as that of the present, that is to say his daily function in the urban contest. Certain monuments, not being themselves artistic masterworks, having taken the part of protagonists in the city where they live, are put in the same category.

Two cases closely connected, in Copenhagen, are exemplary in that sense. The first one is the most famous *Little Mermaid*, that everyone goes to visit, or better to greet, there on the harbour where she stands on a plain rock on the surface of the water. The second one, in many ways, in the town-hall square, is Andersen himself, cast in a mass of bronze slightly bigger than the real, quietly sitting in an arm-chair, on a very low pedestal. In parenthesis, a figure which quite certainly was appreciated by De Chirico, great esteemer of the people of the statues, especially those on low pedestals and thus in direct relation with normal people. Even by only looking at the lonely statue of Andersen one can understand his daily work: his very bright left knee, everyday welcomes many and many children that their parents like to photograph in the arms of the one who wrote the fables of their own childhood and also that of their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. This can appear to be a banal tourist custom (it may be linked with nearby Tivoli Park), but in truth, thinking about of it, the strong ritual strength and the power of memory in defining the meaning of life appear very clearly in all that. Through Andersen, even if bronzified, one wants to live again his own childhood, and that of his own old people, projecting it into that of his children. The function this monument has is the same as that which, according to the desires of the public authorities, all monuments should have, extending the matter from private to political, military, religious history: that is to say the function of «enlivening», «perpetuating» the memory of these values that the immortalized personage should embody.

But as in most cases the values have always been those of an unloved power suffered by people, the function of the monument (*monimentum*, from the verb *moneo*, to admonish) has been expressed by a mere iconic solidification of the symbols of power itself. It has to be said, however, that many honest monuments dedicated to most honourable personages live a distressing suburban existence: writers, scientists, artists, explorers, jurists, scholars, politicians, religious people, whose fame gave them the honour of a statue, or at least of a half-bust, are today neglected, in the corners of the gardens, of the minor small squares, of the yards of public buildings, covered with dust and filth. However they can cheer up, in part, by thinking of those who are condemned to the much more dreary loneliness of the cemeteries.

In recent times, the most widespread monuments are those dedicated to the dead of past wars. There, usually, the figure or the figures don't have a name, exceptions excepted, but they must represent rhetorically «the heroic sacrifice» of the numberless sons of the people: in reality in that case what is glorified is the military uniform, of the «alpini», the infantrymen, the light infantrymen

(«bersaglieri»). Nobody turns on them any special attention, unless relatives or friends of the families of the dead who, however, quite rightly, ignore the sculpture to look at the list of names on the pedestal. It is the triumph of the pedestal, unique element to bear true human memories. After World War II the new wave of War and Resistance memorials opens the doors also to non-figurative languages which contrast with the traditional ones of the past. These monuments, however anonymous like the previous ones, once more intend to be symbolic images, but are completely incomprehensible to the large majority of people.

All this to emphasize an actual fact: that of the crisis of monumental public sculpture today, which in reality means a large part of the historic significance of sculpture. For most people sculpture is still as a matter of fact identified in monuments that in some way may be homologated, identified in respect to one's idea of urban space, as something living in syntony with one's routine and most of all with one's memory and visual culture. The dyscrasia between this latter and the contemporary plastic languages seems in many ways impossible to be filled. One of the most significant facts, about this, is that the building and urbanistic transformation in the last decades has undergone an extraordinary dynamic acceleration, not leaving room to places for the sedimentation of the memory and not caring about inventing new ones.

The monument, by definition characterized by a precise physical position and built «a memoria perenne», however beautiful or ugly it may be, almost turns out today to be an encumbrance less in terms of space than in terms of time, if it's possible to say so. It seems that for the common people, the «real» monuments must be either old or ancient, because in this way alone they mean something, even if they are only minor or suburban presences. For this reason it is very difficult for today's sculpture to be accepted in the public places of the cities, to be understood while safeguarding its own autonomy and aesthetic quality. For this reason sculpture shelters itself mostly inside the safe and reassuring walls of the museums of modern art.

Down from the pedestal.

In 1898, at the Salon in Paris, Rodin showed *Eve*, a bronze nude of natural height: the statue stood with its feet directly on the ground given that the pedestal had been completely put underground, buried. The operation resulted unpublished and for certain ways extraordinary, over and above the particular motivation linked to the theme, that is to say the condemnation of Eve to live on earth after having been banished from Eden. Indeed, one can say that not only Eve has descended from the pedestal: on this occasion Rodin seemed to make sculpture descend from the pedestal in so much as foreshadowing for it its destiny in the avanguard art of 1900. A destiny of freedom from the bonds of celebratory and allegorical representation, for the eternalization of historic, ideological values; in brief, above all freedom from the traditional monumental function, and towards an autonomy of the radically new plastic language. Rodin, himself, after 1900, would realize nudes which only represented themselves, like plastic forms emerging from the vital, expressive tension of the material. It is the definitive break from that academic sculpture which towards the end of the century had arrived even at automonumentalizing itself as for example in the work by Aimé Morot (1850-1913), which is now on show at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, *Jean Léon Gérôme who is sculpting «Les Gladiateurs»*. Homage from pupil to master, where obviously any conscious intention of analytical auto-meditation on sculptural language is absent. On the other hand definitely conscious in this sense is the *Mould of the artist's hand holding a small female torso* by Rodin of 1917. Here it is the hand of the author which provides a «pedestal» for its sculpture shown as a simple plastic body.

Brancusi, even he initially departing from Rodin, after having annulled the last remainders of monumental rhetoric and fragments of classical language, is among the first of those who, looking in particular at primitive art, try to return to the primary physical body of sculpture, to the plastic essentiality of simple, concise forms, to the primordial fascination of objects which are in some way absolute because they are far from every naturalistic mediation between meaningful and meaning. Not therefore sculptures which represent something other than themselves, put in position on a pedestal, but expressively powerful presences in themselves, in the explicit identity of their material.

The kiss, of 1908 (which has, as far as regards conception, an important precedent in Derain's *Crouching figure* of 1907), is a simple block of quadrangular stone where two figures carressing in an embrace are roughly hewn in an archaic stylization: a primary form for a primary act. There is nothing to be too surprised about, I think, in the fact that very precise information about this type of sculpture can be found in the classicist sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand's theoretical essay *The problem of form in painting and sculpture*, 1893. Here, speaking of primitive plasticism, he mentions the antique Egyptians who sculpted crouching figures, tracing them out from simple cubes of stone whose sides remain perfectly conserved. «As it sometimes happens to us - wrote Hildebrand - at a certain distance to take a cube of stone for a crouching man, here the cube of stone is effectively transformed into a figure [...]. It is as though fantasy had made a figure be born from a cube of stone, thus the figure in front of the spectator is led back to the simplest visual sensation». A sculpture like this is born as an animation of simple architectonic elements at the base of buildings: «It is also easy to understand that with time sculpture was released from this subordination to architecture. But then it began to lack the cohesive energy of a total, finished, elementary form». In other words, sculpture having become a completely autonomous figure freed itself and broke itself off from the block of simple, architectonic forms, using these last as a pedestal, a base.

With Brancusi, the return to primitive plasticism is characterized in many ways by a contrary process, organically reabsorbing the pedestal into the whole structure of the sculpture. For example in works like *The witch* (1916) or *Chimera* (1918). The *Endless column* is the reduction of the wooden sculpture to a simple architectonic element, to a pure structural primary module in a vertical sequence: a work without a centre and virtually without a beginning or end. «Brancusi - Carl Andre has said - is the great link to earth and the *Endless column* is naturally the absolute peak of that experience. His sculptures push themselves upwards and thrust themselves down into the earth with a kind of verticality which is not terminal. Before this verticality was terminal: the top of the head and the bottom of the feet were the limits of the sculpture». Not by chance was Brancusi the preferred reference point for Carl Andre and in a certain sense for minimalist sculpture, from the point of view of the primary conception of the materials and of volumes and also as regards the relationship with space.

In a completely different way, through an unexpected operation of a conceptual nature an artist like Piero Manzoni comes to propose the pedestal «in its pure state», as a work in itself. In 1961 he installs in Herning Park in Denmark, *Socle du monde* (*Magic base no. 3, Homage to Galileo*): a cube of iron with upside down writing, placed on four small pilars on the ground. The fascination of this work, which is only a simple cube, is obviously in its capacity to stimulate the imagination of the spectator invited to look at it, mentally or indeed physically; with his head down. The space, the physical place where the cube is set is the true sculpture which, without solutions of continuity, widens itself in order to include all the earth's sphere. An entirely mental work even if of obvious concrete material, in the spirit of the ready made (here the object of the operation is nothing less than the world slightly «rectified» with a pedestal).

Duchamp, demonstrating, with a shrewd displacement, that even an ordinary object can become a

work of art, has widened the range of materials usable for sculpture from those classic ones like bronze, wood, stone, clay to any other substance present in everyday reality. At the extreme, indicating the Empire State Building with a finger, he has realized the most imposing of standing sculptures.

Standing sculpture.

Standing sculpture: sculpture completely in the round, in full relief, which raises itself with its masses and its volumes, with the weight of its material in the space in which it is positioned. And it occupies this space as a protagonist, concentrating the attention on it and on its own internal system of formal relationships and meanings. Indeed, it is a question of a fundamental form in sculpture, of the oldest and most traditional way of conceiving the plastic art, from the monolithic structures of the menhir to the totems and fetishes, from the great ancient and modern statuary to the works of contemporary artists, where other plastic and spatial solutions have entered the game beside the antropomorphic forms which have always been dominant.

After the experiences of the Sixties and Seventies when the quest was directed more towards the problem of environmental installations and the primary expressiveness of the materials (industrial and natural), in the last ten years the need to take into consideration once again with new attention the working practices and the classic materials in painting and sculpture, putting in action a very vital dialectic with the preceding phase, which is far from being exhausted.

In this sense, taking into consideration the aspects of greatest interest in sculpture today (which is not by chance object of ever increasing positive criticism, finally) one must bear in mind the distinct complexity of the actual artistic context, with a critical eye not tied to too hasty historicizing problems or to too rigid classifying schemes. That is to say, in other words, that the question of sculpture is still more than ever open, and that, by the by, interpretations consolidated in past years are by no means considered as definitive. From a perspective which privileges the dimension of «standing sculpture», many preceding works seen above all as operations of inter-relationship with the spatial context can also be considered in diverse, new ways.

In this exhibition it is possible to come across the structural rigour of the minimalists like Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt and Richard Serra; the compact tonnage of stone blocks by Rückriem; the violent and aggressive impact of the German neo-expressionists with figures in bronze and wood; the imposing vertical forms of Schnabel and Flanagan's zoomorphic ones in bronze; the ironic giantism of the torsos in polyurethane by Pistoletto; the bronzed «vegetable gestures» of Penone and the contorted sheets of automobile sheet-metal welded by Chamberlain; the lightness of the «anti-sculpture» of Melotti and the heavyness of the iron sculptures of the Basque «blacksmith» Eduardo Chillida; the welded iron of David Smith and the extraordinary figures of de Kooning. And then Fabro, Fontana, Kirkeby, Masson, Beuys.

An approximate and not ordered list on purpose without solutions of continuity (if not conjunctions and punctuation marks), in order to send one back to the complexity of the possible routes within the rooms of the museum; to the diversity of the presences on the stage to confront, to oppose, to approach. Everything inside the museum, without having to go outside, in order to facilitate a more concentrated and intense understanding of the works.