

From: *Alberto Giacometti*, curated by J. Gachnang, R. Fuchs, C. Mundici, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 6 December 1988 - 26 February 1989), Fabbri Editori, Milano 1988, pp. 68-69.

## ***Giacometti's ear***

**Christiane Meyer-Thoss**

Alberto Giacometti and Meret Oppenheim met in Paris in 1933, in the surrealist milieu. Their association with this movement did not last long and though it cannot be denied that the surrealist outlook had a considerable influence on their work, both of them, feeling superior, soon came to view Surrealism as a formula they should get rid of, an empty shell, a garment they had outgrown. Without this sequence of events, widely known for having given rise to a stimulating intellectual exchange, perhaps their paths would never have crossed, neither from the personal nor from the artistic viewpoint. At first sight they seemed to have little in common: a strong, but brief infatuation on her part which Giacometti did not reciprocate.

At the time, on one of her frequent visits to Giacometti's studio, the young artist produced a drawing called *Giacometti's ear*. Much later this sketch was used as a model: Meret Oppenheim modelled an ear of wax, which was then made into a bronze casting in 1959. The ear was a creation consisting of a Liberty style weird and ancient looking climbing plant, producing the impression of something transparent, like a window. Meret Oppenheim, appreciated for her penetrating, biting and at the same time realistic sense of humour, commented on the famous artist Giacometti with her playful, ironical drawing. The markedly existentialist attitude and the personal pathos of the artist may have surprised her and were surely perceived as a threat.

The ear cast in bronze and a subsequent special version of it (1977) however represented an ironical, light-hearted rendering of the artistic pathos, which made it look like a 19th century fossil. We can also mention Vincent van Gogh's ear - cut off, bleeding, wrapped up in a newspaper - a piece of evidence?

Their Swiss origin was the one element the two artists had in common; this origin is reflected in their yearning for perfection. Because of her nature, equally disdainful and instinctive, of her sharp artistic vision, her creative path unfolded tenacious and perfectly contrary. But this need for perfection was essential to the creative talent of both. Giacometti, on the one hand, with his concept of failure, his notion of art as the representation of a process that never comes to an end. Meret Oppenheim, on the other, taking the opposite path, based on a denial of the process of development - in her own words: «Each idea comes into being together with its own form». She believed whim to be the guiding force in one's work, in life. Life - that was the mysterious space in which the paintings are kept apart, in which the artist, too, moves away from her work. Unlike Giacometti, the creative production of Meret Oppenheim is unpretentious, in the best sense of the term - a lyrical narration in the piece, poetry in the work. Meret Oppenheim's pictures give the impression of having always existed. They are in a hurry, like meteors they have left behind them their long journey, their time, their origin. The bronze ear is one of these «extraterrestrial» objects - with no history, and yet with a history in itself, with no hands, no feet - something which cannot hide its immediacy. In his text on Giacometti - talking about female statues - Jean Genet spoke of queens arising from the dust of the studio, sketched by eternity. Giacometti's life was essentially a draining of all energies in an attempt to represent the singular and divine comedies. Once again, to Meret

Oppenheim life means the space for that rock which rests and has time, until it is used up to give out sparks. Art is when something comes to earth, something, naturally, that will not be forgotten. There are artists we love most dearly for a very simple reason: they show us that something from our dreams can touch the earth, it can reach it. Meret Oppenheim herself was one of these gifts from the stars.

In shifting from one style to another the beauty of her works frequently changed hue - she tried to find her ground, her observation point not through quotations, but by quoting. Availability as a sensual, indeed, as an erotic quality of art has been reawakened through her work. Jumping over the abyss with the eyes open was her aim. Only occasionally in her work she allowed herself to stumble over the depth - a sudden unveiling of the darkness she experienced. The two artists were brought together again by their admiration for Georges Braque; for Giacometti, however, it was rather a matter of salvation from the abysmal. We can find a hint about the relationship between fragility and eternity in a remark of his about a still life with flowers by Braque: «... he [Braque] tries to save something from the black, boundless abyss that surrounds us and that assaults it [the picture] on all sides, but no! Not the flowers! We, and the picture, are the most fragile. The flowers keep growing, and their black is not ours. I go up to the window, look out into the night, at the black mountain, the sky with so many shining stars, the murmuring waters. Yes, men - like flowers - keep growing, never exactly in the same way; yet, they paint and this changes many things».