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End games of the modern

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Hôtel Aiglon, boulevard Raspail 232. At this hotel Alberto Giacometti spent a few days of rest after undergoing stomach surgery and while he was there he drew: drew the hotel room, the round table next to an extremely tall window, the armchair, the breakfast tray. These few drawings of 1961 depicting an hotel room convey an impression of peace, of serenity such as can be rarely found in his works. They are not dominated by the panic of an exaggerated subjective perspective, they live by bringing things close to one another, and space gradually lightens deriving its luminosity from the objects. Bundles of thin lines are built in heaps, traces of light abrasions produce an errant light, we perceive a dim recollection of the cage-like sculptures of his surreal period. Drama is absent from these sheets; they were produced by a firm hand which serenely fashioned the fluctuating room into a still structure. Perhaps these drawings are so full of fervour precisely because they do not deal with the power of man, they are not portraits of the human figure, rather they were born of its absence. They make us forget the powerful sovereign whose presence permeates Giacometti's other works, and to whom these drawings incessantly pay homage, «an exacting contraposition, an ethical necessity, for which the observer must take full responsibility»¹.

It seems as though Giacometti has allowed himself to give free rein to a lightness he rarely experienced, as if he has temporarily interrupted - at least over this brief period of convalescence - his painful resistance against the suggestive power of his talent.

We should perhaps seek a new approach to the artist, setting aside these exceptional aspects of his works and a few marginalia on the history of perception. But how can one speak of Giacometti whose life and works have reached us from the past in the form of an impenetrable, constantly evolving myth? The most famous authors of his time - Michel Leiris, Francis Ponge, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Genet - wrote about him, stimulated by what was defined as the monomaniac silence of his work, and in doing so they conceived the mountaineer from Paris, the desperate, obsessed caveman of rue Hippolyte-Maindron who anxiously sought the image of man and in his search was turned to stone, changed into a monument. Everybody keeps quoting that avalanche of words under which the artist used to crush his works and his skills: «It is impossible! nothing comes out right, each stroke makes it worse!», words that were familiar to each visitor and to all his models. Few people recognized in this ritual of complaints, the imperious claim, in keeping with Nietzsche's theories, to establish himself the level of criticism, to be the sole judge of his works: «In his artistic activity he was not interested in producing something that would be acceptable by the usual standards, he wanted something altogether different, something simply perfect. By making explicit reference to his incapacity, he ruled out any criticism based on the customary, feeble criteria of judgement»².

His appearance prompted anecdotes which he, being the charming actor that he was, encouraged, staging his own myth. «The man talking to you so quickly is a Cocteau inbred with a farmer from the Graubünden Canton who can hardly stand up and holds on to an easel with both arms, like a survivor from a shipwreck. - Brassai, take a photo of me looking like this... this pose corresponds

just perfectly to my physical conditions... I am so tired, exhausted; I am a wreck... and nevertheless I am working, you see, I still go on producing»³.

In this connection the artist's studio was of decisive importance as the place where the legend originated. Brassai compared it to a stormy sea. We are reminded of Blaise Pascal's saying which stated that the unhappiness of men stemmed from the fact they were unable to remain quietly in a room. Giacometti's unrelenting and monomaniac struggle with the daemon brings back to life the topos of the mad creator: a recurring literary theme since the beginning of the 19th century which later on was taken up and vulgarized by the motion pictures. This was also the way photographers, like Brassai, worked, trying to unveil Giacometti's sculptures and lay bare the secret of the face mask and the personality of their creator, in an attempt to shed light onto these majestic works which evaded analysis.

For the Pierre Matisse exhibit held in New York in the Spring of 1948 Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a brilliant, albeit self-centered, essay: *Alberto Giacometti. The Search for the Absolute*. Taking possession of Giacometti, he made him into the prototype of the existentialist artist and in doing this founded a tradition of essay writing in which the meanings defined were passed on to others and packed so thickly together that today's readers cannot but come to the conclusion that Giacometti was an artist for the writers more than for the artists.

Perhaps Barnett Newman who had seen Giacometti's show in New York treated with mistrust this parade of philosophical premises; the American critic's pretentious reaction to Giacometti's works combined overt admiration with a rejection of pathological interpreters: «Giacometti's sculptures look as though they have been fashioned by a ghost - new things without shape, without surface, yet, in some way, accomplished; I raise my hat before them»⁴.

Ten years later Jean Genet wrote about Giacometti. The solitary man with a criminal background had been his model again and again. In his text *Alberto Giacometti's atelier* he took a stand against Sartre's attempt to take possession of Giacometti. Genet's text shunned all references to the existentialist abyss, it created a distance, by blaming Giacometti it respected the substantial estrangement, the loneliness which, to Genet, represented the essence of all tenderness, of presence. This is where disquiet and moments of uncertainty make their first appearance, in this text broken off by the claims of the body, by the moods of desire. Despite all the veneration and the allurements, though, inhibition and resistance can also be perceived: the text contains secret thoughts and unleashed mental images which contribute in a new key to the understanding of the artist. Written by an untrained person who did not flirt with words but rather had pulled himself out from the swamp by writing and developing an outsider's moral, this essay contained suggestions that were decisive in as much as they raised questions. Questions which become urgent for an observer of our time who will not merely view Genet's first text as the herald of an eccentric approach, since he has been exposed to the developments that have taken place in the art since Giacometti's death in 1966, to all that has come about since the early '80s: from the far-reaching revisions introduced by Minimal and Conceptual Art, to the expansion and thorough re-examination of the very notion of art brought about by Beuys and by Arte Povera, to the challenge of painting sculpture.

«Giacometti and I - as well as a couple of other people from Paris, to be sure - know that there is an extremely elegant, stylish, regal character who dwells in Paris, standing upright and grey, delicately grey; it is rue Oberkampf which changes name with nonchalance and becomes rue Mémilmontant further on. As beautiful as a needle, it climbs up to the sky ... I hope Giacometti will forgive me if I say this road pointing straight upward is nothing but one of his big statues; at the same time restless and shivering and joyful»⁵.

To Genet the street is the place where one sells himself and shows himself off, where the characters in his book, much like himself, experience triumph and humiliation, a shelter to one's loneliness,

genuine in its indifference. The street is the very essence of the public and of the ordinary, of secret and hidden events: a goddess and a whore at the same time. Genet speaks of the unceasing movement of Giacometti's sculptures. The figures in Giacometti's sculptures carved in day keep moving, up and down, continuously, bringing to mind the gestures of a gardener pruning his rose espaliers, making grafts. Gardeners, plasterers, pastry cooks, the proud and hard working breed of Bergell craftsmen. Giacometti, exiled to the big city, goes one step further than his ancestors, setting for himself the contradictory task of linking his craft with a critical-cognitive perspective, pursuing, that is, the aim to «set free plastic art tied to matter in its materiality»⁶.

Genet sets himself against the hasty recognition of what Sartre calls the «absolute distance» of sculptures, denies their ecstatic and sacred qualities, and therefore insists on the experience of the sense of touch, dwells on the feelings of happiness that the sculptures convey to the fingers, calls Giacometti's works «sculptures for the blind». In this way he wants to emphasize their potential in terms of energy, show how they fill the void to yield a volume, of the sleep-walkers's assurance with which they cross the void and occupy its centre, meeting points of a tangle of forces and radiations. The aura of the statues, understood as the intensity of their epiphany, seems necessarily tied up with an act of withdrawal, of refusal; «... his statues produce an impression of seeking shelter in some sort of secret fragility which grants them solitude»⁷.

There is an evident reminiscence of the works by Joseph Beuys which find their necessary condition in a lesion, in a wound. In this case we cannot speak of a secret fragility, nor of forms that enwrap and conceal, but rather of a revelation and a transformation of the lesion into energy which goes beyond social plastic art: «Show your wound!» Energy which enlarges the concept of sculpture and art into an extension of life itself as the utopia of unconfined ethics, of unrestricted freedom of action.

Giacometti's sculptures seem in some way immunized against actual space, they enter a scenario of their own, they are given a world of apparitions all to themselves, In several of his works it is the base, the sode, the ramp which heightens the multiplication of space within space, and which can be regarded as a shielding structure.

There is no sharper contrast than that between Giacometti's sculptures and plain industrially-produced objects, the way they were presented in the '60s by the generation of American Minimal artists. The latter thought that the essence of sculpture lay in going back to the fundamental modes of perception, in setting up an ordered sequence of proofs for the unending process of perception, and finally in linking the ideal of total form with the anonymous principle of modular alignment.

Giacometti's sculptures, instead, are insistent and compelling, genuine in their fragility and yet striking in their appearance, evoking the Muses's pathos in themselves.

«One of your statues in a room, and the room is a temple», remarked Genet in a conversation with Giacometti who seemed to find this statement disconcerting.

«No one so far has become important because of the Alps; but perhaps because of them Nietzsche went mad a few years earlier that he was destined to... I believe the influence of wonderful nature on the work of the intellect is this: one slips into errors, and the errors are excused. We should be able to control the effect of the mountain tops, like that of alcoholic beverages, by taking it in small amounts (and be able to interrupt at will).

- But in the morning, when Nietzsche would wake up in Sils Maria, the frightening, shining, impending mountain was still there - nothing alleviated the feverish and grotesque form of his dream... »⁸.

The figures in Giacometti's paintings emerge from a wave of appearing and disappearing, only in this uninterrupted fluctuation could the image of man make once again its appearance in late 20th century art.

Giacometti's portraits voice the paradox of this nostalgia, their faces are so incredible and yet so

triumphant, so weary and yet so full of life.

Over the last ten years of Giacometti's struggle on the *Sujet und Subjekt*, a philosophical movement opposed to Existentialism drew the consequences from the findings of linguistics, psychoanalysis and ethnology and criticized the transcendental premises of human science based on «structural» concepts such as discontinuity, decentering, absence of the *sujet*, event. In his analysis *Les mots et les choses* (1966) Michel Foucault tried to demonstrate that human reason as the foundation of philosophical discourse is bound to vanish «like a face drawn in the sand of the seashore».

Friedrich Nietzsche with his philosophy of the «change in the value of values» and the «idea of eternal return» first conceived in Sils Maria was to the new philosophy the principal witness of an ecstatic experience. Besides Georges Bataille there was Pierre Klossowski, who in a mixture of Pagan-Greek innocence and perverse theology played his literary games with the subject as it dissolved in the space of ambiguity. In his novel *Le Baphomet* (1965) dealing with the heresies of the Order of the Templars, he freed Friedrich Nietzsche from the weight of his human existence and presented him, hundreds of years in advance, in the form of an ant-eater. Driven by a chain, reproducing the spiral-like movements of infinity, he spat - as one would logically expect - on the crucifix and swept the ground with his large moustache, uncaring.

In this character Pierre Klossowski combined the writer and the philosopher, and the artist as well. In his inexperienced but extremely penetrating drawings, scandalous from both a moral and an artistic viewpoint (whose first exhibition was fostered by Alberto Giacometti himself, he provided a clear exemplification of what he called a hallucination, a simulacrum. In the name of this «pseudo-concept» he undertook in his essays a critical re-examination of modern art. Klossowski insists on an initial experience of incommunicability which is felt by every artist, an obsession which the artist tries to get across as a form of exorcism, torn between the need and the impossibility to communicate. In these conditions, the image that is produced can be nothing but a transcription, an analogy, the materialization of a heightened sensitivity.

«In this sense and regardless of his "Sujet" or "Motiv", a painter tries to come close to his invisible model, to seduce it, so as to communicate it through its resemblance, its simulacrum»⁹. Klossowski believed that this power of alluring, of making visible the basic obsession, belonged to the figurative art devoted to the image of man, rather than to the realm of abstraction.

Giacometti's often repeated, and annoyingly sober, message, that the only thing he was interested in - in art - was «resemblance» will now perhaps be viewed in a new light and will no longer be misunderstood as extreme naturalism. At any rate Klossowski did not merely advocate a transformation in the mind, but also the interpenetration of categories which had become barren.

«I remember Giacometti's words: "A picture is in itself an abstraction!" What can be more abstract than the figure? A figurative image can be immediately transformed into abstract art»¹⁰.

Giacometti's portraits are narratives of sufferings. This is what led a generation of young painters to identify with him, including Martin Disler, a self-taught Swiss painter, who called him «an outsider-dog shining pitch-dark». Giacometti worked furiously, unsparingly, stamping his feet and swearing, he wanted to condense and get to the kernel, through and alternation of spiritual penetration and desperate fury, his paintings took on the appearance of shrouds. In an incessant cycle of construction, liberatory destruction and fresh starts, Giacometti always went back to the beginning of his work, allowed himself at the most to make millimetric progress in his search for the «atmospheric space which surrounds substance directly, penetrates into it, it is already one with substance itself»¹¹. Conventional painting techniques - frames inside the surface of the picture, graphic space structures - attach themselves to the bodies, to the heads, like affirmations of a certainty that has long since become obsolete.

Giacometti's astronauts do not get lost because the entire force of gravity is gathered inside their heads - «lead balls, fluctuating in their trajectory», says Genet -, because an immense shadow bears

on their backs as if the reason of their relative stability, what enables them to stand erect, should be sought behind the canvas.

On the stage of the theatre of the absurd. For a new *mise-en-scène* of *En attendant Godot* Giacometti, a close friend of Beckett's, had designed a small apple tree. But this work was also difficult to bring to completion, In Giacometti words: «All night long we worked on the apple tree, trying to make it bigger, then smaller, or with finer branches, and it never looked right and we kept telling each other "maybe"»¹².

The crisis of evaluation becomes deeper. It is easy to imagine the coreography of that night. The artist and the writer going round and round each other as if they were inside the magic circle of the tree, carrying within themselves their loathing of definitions.

In the post-war scenario Beckett and Giacometti stood out as dust-grey monoliths; through their solitude and tremendous compactness they had perfected their singularity. Albeit on different shores, both were protagonists of the end game of the modern. In an attempt to «Step out of time» they endeavoured to banish from their works all that was tied up with their time, and in doing so the writer attained perhaps a longer lasting success than the figurative artist.

«... it is extremely difficult to reflect on him, because he has reached a final form. The last remnant of a great vitality struggles with the deadly form»¹³.

Some of the multi-dimensional bronze statuettes produced by A. R. Penck in the mid '80s do not only appear as an incarnation of an original iconography, but they also relate to shapes by Brancusi and Giacometti. When Penck speaks of the «deadly form» - a fixing of the artist's activities of the definitive and on one's own work - we may discern in this the refusal and the conflicting attitude of a generation of artists who because of their biography reassured themselves about their origin and whose works reflected something biographical-contemporary (in this particular case a German mark, of German origin). The circumstances, the time and place of the creation of a sculpture are of essential importance for Penck, form cannot be carried to the fore until the links with the vital process, the connections with one's activities are severed.

One can also think of Markus Lüpertz's sculpture *Standbein-Spielbein* of 1982 and compare it with Giacometti's *Das Bein* of 1958. Lüpertz takes the classical motif of the harmonious contrast between rest and movement and gives it a provocative turn through fragmentation (Rodin), and by refining and partly painting it gives shape to his sculpture in an anti-classical manner. A sculpture as a discourse on the history of sculpture.

The painters-sculptors of the '80s welcome the tension field of art, history and tradition, they do not believe themselves to be hermits nor holy fools, they view impurity as a stimulating quality of their art.

From Maurice Blanchot we learn that «the desert - labyrinth man» can suffer the experience of the infinity of space indifferently in a secluded room or wandering round the world.

Let us however look for Giacometti once more, when he went outdoors; we find him in the lithographs collected in the volume *Paris sans fin*. Produced over the years 1958-65 they were made with a technique which called for a rapid execution with no subsequent corrections or excessive details, and thus ruled out doubts and the possibility of starting afresh.

Needless to say, this work too did not proceed without crises or changes of mood, still, it resulted in 150 lithographs which reproduced Giacometti's Paris, the stages in his life: his atelier, rue Hippolyte-Maindron, Montparnasse with its cafés and restaurants, the trees lining rue d'Alésia. There is also «a road in the outskirts, viewed from the right hand side seat of a car». These sheets combine a refreshing spontaneity with the expert ability of the figurative artist. They express Giacometti's «desire to draw his impressions of Paris», to leave for posterity the skeletal images of places, spaces and people, to combine perceptions and radiographs of the world of appearance.

Giacometti's drawings are invariably fascinating. Drawing was to him an indispensable activity, like

breathing. In his work he combined a marked awareness of traditions with spontaneous inventiveness, a private atmosphere with conceptualism; this is where Giacometti attained the greatest freedom and virtuosity.

For him space could only be conceived as a mutual relationship between things or as an emanation of what stands before them, for him the arrangement of a cup, an ashtray and a packet of cigarettes on a table could be so disquieting as to make him seek new constellations for hours until a solution was found... yet, when drawing, this artist would yield himself to a detail, to a single object, taking possession of it, exploring it like an insect. In this activity he found peace, he seemed to experience a quiet curiosity so unlike his notorious scepticism.

«Fear takes my hand and guides me; a white lisle glove; a fingerless glove. I love, I adore fear. I could almost say: when fear is with me I am no longer afraid!»¹⁴.

¹ Franz Meyer, Alberto Giacometti. *Eine Kunst existentieller Wirklichkeit*, Frauenfeld-Stuttgart 1968, p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³ Brassai, *Ma dernière visite à Giacometti*, in Louis Aragon et al., *Wege zu Giacometti*, München 1987, p. 180.

⁴ Quoted by Dieter Honisch, *Groß und klein bei Giacometti*, in *Alberto Giacometti*, exhibition catalogue, Nationalgalerie, Berlin and Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Berlin 1988, p. 101.

⁵ Jean Genet, *L'atelier de Alberto Giacometti*, *ibid.*, pp. 365 ff.

⁶ Gottfried Boehm, *Das Problem der Form bei Alberto Giacometti*, in Aragon et al., *Wege zu Giacometti*, op. cit., p. 66.

⁷ Genet, *L'atelier de Alberto Giacometti* op. cit., p. 365.

⁸ Ludwig Hohl, *Vom Arbeiten. Bild*, Frankfurt am Main 1978, p. 116.

⁹ Pierre Klossowski, *Die Ähnlichkeit*, Bern-Berlin 1986, p. 114.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹¹ Alberto Giacometti, Henri Laurens, in Aragon et al., *Wege zu Giacometti* op. cit., p. 133.

¹² James Lord, *Alberto Giacometti. Der Mensch und sein Lebenswerk*, Bern-München-Wien 1987, p. 387.

¹³ A. R. Penck, *Sculptures*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Maeght Lelong, Zürich 1986.

¹⁴ Osip Mandel'stam, *Das Rauschen der Zeit*, Zürich 1985, p. 240.