

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. 58-60.

## ***Human***

### **Jole de Sanna**

Giacometti expressed the essence of a cultural world which materialized in France as Existentialism at a time when various «Realisms» came to life in the world. «For me - he says - reality remains exactly as original and unexplored as the first time anyone tried to represent it... When I commenced seeing, I saw as through a screen, through the art of the past, and then little by little I began to see beyond the screen, and beyond the known the unknown appeared. Then I could marvel at it, but at the same time became unable to portray it»<sup>1</sup>. The Buddhist myth of knowing through a veil, as divulged by Schopenhauer, had received with Metaphysics its consecration; following this, the *way* knowledge is acquired emerged as the object of the representation. The hardship of knowing leads to an irregular, uneven description of the model: «The more I work, the more I see things differently, that is, everything gains in grandeur everyday, becomes more and more unknown, more and more beautiful. The closer I come, the grander it is, the more remote it is»<sup>2</sup>.

Jean-Paul Sartre described this protracted, bouncing knowledge in the same words: «Four tiny unapproachable figures, balancing on a blade in the background, a vertical parquet. He portrayed them the way he saw them: *far away*»<sup>3</sup>.

Giacometti took man as his model and changed him into something which was neither dis-human nor in-human, but rather fragmentarily human: not a speechless representation, though, but rather an eloquent one. Man was still there: «distant, it is true», claimed Sartre, but «after all it is man who has created the distance and this distance has no meaning other than within a human space»<sup>4</sup>.

Giacometti had shown his concern with figures since his earliest works, in 1933, though at the time he had been adopted by the Surrealists. But actually there is no evidence to substantiate the idea that Surrealism had banned the human figure and nothing justifies an amazing remark - which we have read in the critical notes accompanying recent shows of Giacometti's works - which claims that in 1935 or so the artist committed a «crime» and challenged Breton's authority by producing a traditional representation of the human head. This gave rise to the persistent legend which made him the champion of artistic freedom against the dictates of the avant-garde, the one who bravely brought about the come back of figurative art in the mid '30s.

In actual fact, nothing had stopped being figurative during the 1910s, the 20's, or the '30s, and everything continued to be abstract, during those years and for the future: a false problem.

In 1933, the year of Giacometti's debut, Picasso saturated - and stunned - the Parisian milieu with a vast and extraordinary output of sculptures. The first issue of the Surrealist magazine «Minotaure» contained a long essay by Breton on the «extra-pictorial» activity of the master: behind the cover reproducing a minotaur which Breton himself had drawn, there could be found sculptures by Picasso fanning out in all directions; one group in particular, that of the so-called «monumental» sculptures - all of them elongated, stretching upwards -, stood out among the rest. Picasso was at it again, making his experiments opposite to the force of gravity - as he used to do with his wire creations; his sculptures, when they were not made of wire, still had a wire like quality.

This was the time, this was the context when Giacometti joined the Surrealist movement<sup>5</sup> and two

of his works were put on display at the Pierre Colle Gallery, alongside those of the leading surrealist artists<sup>6</sup>: the *Table*, a surrealist painting which was purchased by Noailles, and *Mannequin (Femme qui marche)*, a figure with extended, but otherwise unscathed, limbs. Now, the question is: which of these two elements - the integrity of the shapes or their elongation after the manner of Picasso - should be viewed as more important? The answer we provide should be the due in deciding Giacometti's position, that is, whether he was for or against the vanguard. But Giacometti, like Brancusi, was an artist who exercised an immediate appeal which had little or nothing to do with his acceptance or his rejection of the avant-garde.

Giacometti and Brancusi both had a way of fashioning form which corresponded to the way people liked to see themselves: it is in this connection that we can find a theme worth considering and suggest an investigation into a particular aspect of 20th century art: that is to say, art as regarded from the viewpoint of social sensitivity.

Though they did not belong to any given movement in particular, the two artists were capable of translating the attainments matured by the art of their time into a language which the public could easily identify with. The reason for this, it may be assumed, lies in the pleasure of packing into a single document the work of at least three generations.

This synthesis was brought to completion by Giacometti in the late '40s: the *vertically arranged* human figure breaks through the lines and obeys to *open matter* (see Medardo Rosso).

In this connection a critic might wonder - with typical and idle curiosity -: was this a synthesis or was it a matter of stylization? And needless to say the next question would be: what is the difference between synthesis and stylization? An exiting question in a context - this century - which has done away with styles to replace them with movements. A style entails the possibility of using shapes as models. And in actual fact, in a large proportion of subsequent sculptures the dissolution of the body was performed for the sake of style so that the '50s were populated by a sad crowd of flayed bodies. Therefore it would perhaps be wrong to attribute to Giacometti the creation of a style consisting of rough figures, or ascribe to Brancusi the invention of a «polished» style. Rather than of a style, we should perhaps speak about a *signature*, something halfway between the projections of art and what makes a work recognizable.

Among the compulsions that constrained the art of our century and determined its typical patterns of behaviour, an urge to take into account the impact of artistic production on society - and the latter's willingness to listen - comes up with cyclic frequency: Rodin, at the turn of the century, set a precedent, Andy Warhol in the '60s was a further instance of this. This compulsion arises, at times, alongside another, more typical and permanent tendency, that of serving as a «trench», a watch post always on the alert to give voice to the slightest changes in orientation, the champion, the best example we know about Picasso.

Giacometti's early activities disclosed the innermost essence of the times: when he saw Surrealism (*Table*, 1933, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne), Cubism (*Tête dite cubiste*, about 1934, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne) and Picasso's sculptures (*Femme qui marche*, 1933, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne). After 1945, with the de-materialized plaster of his *Diane Bataille*, the synthesis can be deemed to have reached its completion through the inclusion of *Italian open matter*: Lucio Fontana had been its recent promoter in France during the '30s.

---

<sup>1</sup> James Lord, *Giacometti, a biography*, Faber & Faber, London-Boston 1985, p. 474.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les peintures de Giacometti*, in «Derrière le miroir», no. 65, May 1954.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

- 
- <sup>5</sup> A. Giacometti, a reply to the investigation by A. Breton and P. Éluard, in «Minotaure», no. 3-4, 1934.
- <sup>6</sup> Hans Arp, André Breton, Salvador Dalí, Marcel Duchamp, Paul Éluard, Marie-Berthe Ernst, Max Ernst, Arthur Harfaux, Maurice Henry, Georges Hugnet, Valentine Hugo, Marcel Jean, René Magritte, Joan Miró, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, Tutundjan (Pierre Colle Gallery, 7-8 June 1933).