Alberto Giacometti, the object, the void, and the death of man

Alain Cueff

L'objet invisible [The invisible object], also known as *Mains tenant le vide* [Hands holding the void], is the last surrealist work of Alberto Giacometti:[1] probably inspired by a sculpture in the ethno-graphical museum in Basel, it is a narrow female figure, standing and seated at the same time, which seems to be holding an "invisible" object in its hands. In the text he devoted to it,[2] André Breton wanted to see it as "the emanation of the desire to love and to be loved in quest of its true human object, which is painfully unknown." Before he discovered a mask in Giacometti's company, a discovery to which he attached a determining importance, Breton thought he saw the lack "of an assurance about reality, an anchor point in the world of tangible objects." He added: "There was a lack of any point of comparison, even a distant one, that might abruptly confer certainty." In other words, a work cannot stand by itself, totally independent from the world. And in his concern to impose a grid on the imaginary order, not only does Breton fail to take into account either of the two titles of the sculpture, but he persists in considering the position of the hands as indicating a missing object. And he naturally sets to dreaming, without saying so this time, of a new object that would come to fill up this void and this unacceptable interstice. For Breton, the invisible can and must be converted into an absence, the void into a lack: objects, found or dreamt of, fantasized or analyzed, essentially have the task of ensuring a continuity between perceptions and realities, that is, of interceding with the magical powers of the beyond.

And yet, if the hands seem to be grasping the void, if the object is invisible, it is because it is already destroyed, or more exactly, because this most important of art works constitutes a decisive effort to make the object cede its place -all place- to the human figure. A few years earlier, Giacometti had already set forth the premises of that destruction: *Femme égorgée* [Woman with her throat cut] (1932), which reappears as the spider described in *Le rêve, le sphinx et la mort de T.* [The dream, the sphinx, and the death of T.], 1946, is obviously much more indebted to the writings of Georges Bataille and the explorations of the journal *Documents* than to orthodox surrealist theories. The ambivalence between the animal and the human, the link between the sexual act and murder,[3] adequately attest to the violence Giacometti was perpetrating at the same time on the art object, both against its historicized forms and against the principle of realism. For him, objects no longer performed the slightest function of mediation between time or between human beings, just as

dreams had lost their function to join perception and reality. And, if that irreducible difference between the two men were not significant enough, remember that, in spite of his insistence, Breton never obtained from Giacometti the materialization of the "Cinderella ashtray" (cendrier Cendrillon) he had dreamed of, and which he wanted to touch with his own hands.[4] Entering a discontinuous space where rituals and fetishes are excluded and where equivalences are proscribed because of their very futility, Giacometti now allowed only the figure into his works.

At the end of 1934, for the needs of his programmed and inevitable break with Giacometti, Breton decided he knew what a head was. He knew or, more likely, he did not want to know, considering the little use value of a mere head, which stands mute opposite the chattering of the living, and shies away from communication and the occult communion of thoughts. The sculptor Giacometti had every reason to believe the opposite, even though, or because, "it is somewhat abnormal to spend one's time, not in living, but in trying to copy a head, to immobilize the same person for five years on a chair every night, to try to copy it but without success." Various writings by Giacometti, published before or after his death, present the head as an obsessional motif: from Géricault's heads of torture victims, to the hallucinated death of T., into whose mouth a fly vanishes, to the head he does not manage to seize as a whole and which he throws into the trash in 1920, the head remains the stumbling block for an incredulous gaze on a world where the dead unexpectedly take the place of the living. The head, which Giacometti implicitly distinguishes from the face, and which he grasped in the form of a skull in an extraordinary 1923 painting, is less the site of the mind and of feelings than the part of the body where life and death oscillate and interpenetrate in all their animal brutality. He never seeks to rid himself of that fascination by reallocating it elsewhere. On the contrary, he writes of Jacques Callot: "The form is always adequate to that obsession."

The head does not express the uniqueness of the other, nor is it even the incarnation of the Other. It is clearly not by chance that Diego, both Giacometti's brother and his double, becomes the first but also the most constant model in that concrete and repetitive undertaking. Dozens of sculptures have his brother's name as their title; it is the name of the same, apart from all psychology, rather than the name of the father. In a 1959 note, Giacometti speaks of a forthcoming portrait of Diego as if it were the first time he was undertaking it, as if, far from having captured the details over the previous fifteen years, everything still remained to be discovered. Accounts from various models attest to the sculptor's demanding ways, his obstinacy and resistance. Whether in the 1930's or at the end of his life, Giacometti concentrated the same energy in endless posing sessions. And, in spite of the privilege granted to one model or another, they seem to have become interchangeable "Diego, Annette, Caroline, other sculptures, paintings, drawings"—and to have fallen into line with a single, generic model.

To copy again and again. But to copy is not simply to indulge in some sort of mimesis, since there are no heads as faces but only one Head. Appearances are

contingent, a fact that does not rule out the possibility that the particular details of a model may serve as a new and necessary stimulus, as his experiment with Isaku Yanaihara shows. The question of resemblance is transported far from its ordinary sense and requirements: resemblance is not a goal, not a more or less accomplished fact that could be assessed, but a process, a movement, a metamorphosis. In that sense, it is a game, a labor that corresponds to the reign of the image as Georges Bataille conceived it,[5] and which does not obey the rules of the Idea, but rather slips away from the positivity of plastic appearances. Jean Genet made this movement the foremost quality of Giacometti's work. The beauty of these sculptures, he wrote, "seems to me to lie in that incessant, uninterrupted shuffling back and forth between extreme distance and the most intimate familiarity: this shuffling back and forth is never-ending, and it is in that sense one can say (these works) are in movement."[6]

This movement does not obey any temporal logic,[7] which would make Diego better resemble himself over time or would atribute to *L'homme qui marche sous la pluie* [Man walking in the rain] a "before" and an "after" in a narrative structure. No, it is "as if space had taken the place of time"—an empty and discontinuous space, "the great gaping void in which [the] characters [of Jacques Callot] gesticulate, exterminate one another, and abolish one another." In this void exposed to the elements, the permanence of the models is in no way a guarantee of continuity in time or space, which, according to Giacometti's depiction of it in *Le rêve, le sphinx et la mort de T.*, is a sort of disk, that is, a plane without a middle, without coherence, devoid of every principle of synthesis, whose different parts are, on the contrary, separated by irreducible lines. When he is prompted to say, "I don't know what space is," it is not that he is recognizing an incapacity within himself to construct space, but rather that he is noting the dislocation of spatial parameters. The different cages -the cage that contains a head and a silhouette in the eponymous work of 1950, the cage in *Le nez* [The nose], *Figurine dans une boîte entre deux maisons* [Small figure in a box between two houses], or the cages sketched in most of his paintings— certainly do not aim to reconstitute space or to give it an effective form. Like the cages, squares do not depict a theater where the imaginary could identify the scenes from a psychological action or existential situation: they are pedestals for a segmentation, a fragmentation of the human body's consciousness.

Le Torse [The torso] (1925), *Pointe à l'oeil* [Point to the eye] (1932), *La main* [The hand] (1947), *Le nez* [The nose] (1947), and *La jambe* [The leg] (1958), punctuate with a strange regularity the uneasy relation to the part and to the whole that Giacometti maintained and discussed from the beginning to the end of his life. Regarding *La jambe*, he says, "I cannot simultaneously see the eyes, the hands, the feet of a person [...] but the single part I look at conveys the sensation of the existence of the whole." In contrast, when he undertakes to restore a person in its entirety, or, in any case, from head to toe, he notes the impossibility of grasping it as a whole. "If I look at the front of you, I forget the profile. If I look at the profile, I forget the front

view." His spindly figures seem sure of their integrity. But, because they result from an incapacity to grasp the totality, they are not whole but immeasurably reduced in size: they are the result of an undertaking as destructive as that at work in the fragments; in reality, they are like the *membra disjecta* of a single fantasized body, which Giacometti cannot or will not grasp.

Giacometti sets himself definitively apart from the mythological model of Pygmalion. If resemblance is an always discontinuous and incomplete process and not a system for pairing the inanimate with the living, it goes without saying that resemblance in no way seeks to produce or restore life, since it intends "only" to copy these "residues of vision" where death is secretly and obstinately at work. We do not have to scour his texts for long to find the cannibalistic dimension of his thinking and of his practice, a cannibalism at equal distance from literal experience and metaphorical speculation. "Eroticism- a branch of nutrition. Attraction, love, murder, anthropophagy, phases of the same desire," one reads in a 1944 note. As he says in the same note, this cannibalism is the search for a synthesis between the external world and oneself. Because it is impossible and will not lend itself to the narrative cohesion of the surrealist dream, that attempt at synthesis feeds Giacometti's perpetual struggle with the human —Giacometti, who understood himself and saw himself as a dog,[8] or in any case as a man who would never be certain of his full right of membership in the human race. And who, in fact, demanded none of the rights that such membership would have conferred on him.

The endo-cannibalistic Giacometti devoured his models in order to extract them from the space of the tomb, and not to reappropriate them or to capture their being -since most of them were part of his family. He was no more haunting the other than he was haunted by the other, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty claimed.[9] Especially since, as a petrification of being, the fusion Giacometti accomplished is much more intimately primitive and violent than it may seem and, as such, it owes as much to the gaze as to the hands that model, that strangle, matter. The "duplicity of sensing," also described by Merleau-Ponty, has no existence either; there is only a rupture that ironically reminds the viewer of the inadequacy of his retinal vision, that reminds him of the ridiculously tenuous character of the distinction made between life and death.

When referring to Giacometti, the phenomenological vocabulary favored the dialectic of absence and presence. But what these heads and ravaged figures confront us with is rather our incapacity to assimilate the human being in all its fragmentary forms. We are hardly in a position to mimic the artist's cannibalism, and the artist certainly does not invite us to do so. Yet that is what Michel Leiris believed, he who saw the works of the 1920's as "meals of stone, food of bronze, marvelously alive."[10] Neither guilty nor innocent, we are witnesses to a murder that takes place from time immemorial, and for which the sculptures serve as something like reliefs.It is also in that sense that Giacometti's relation to primitivism is more fundamental than a history of forms can reconstruct: he does not indulge in

modernist exorcism—as Picasso did with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*—nor does he under-interpret primitive art, as Matisse did.[11] He understands it in the immediacy of a dialogue and quickly distances himself from the idealism within which his contemporaries contained death.

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1 The last, that is, if we concede that Giacometti ever was a surrealist, which, in spite of the circumstances and the insistence of certain critics, is far from indisputable. **2** André Breton, "Équation de l'objet trouvé" (1934), reprinted in *L'amour fou*, Paris, 1937. **3** "Goal of the pleasure of love in murder," one reads in a 1944 note, published in *Écrits*, edited by Michel Leiris and Jacques Dupin (Paris, 1990). **4** See Yves Bonnefoy, *Giacometti*, Paris, 1991. He found its equivalent during the same 1934 visit to the flea market. **5** See Georges Didi-Huberman, La ressemblance informe ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1995. **6** Jean Genet, *L'atelier d'Alberto Giacometti* [1957], Décines, Marc Barbezat / L'Arbalète, 1986. **7** "I negate time," one reads on a drawing from 1934-35, reproduced in *Écrits, op. cit*. **8** In fact, *The Dog* (1951) is undoubtedly his only sculpted self-portrait, in the traditional sense of the word. **9** Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'esprit,* Paris, Gallimard, 1964. **10** Michel Leiris, "Alberto Giacometti," *Documents,* 1929. **11**