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Table of Contents

Paul Crowther

The Need for Art, and the Aesthetics of the Self: A Copernican Turn 1-21

The Aesthetics Group

*Turn, Turn, Turn: Civic Instrumentalisation and the Promotion of
Autonomy in Contemporary Arts Funding* 22-45

Gemma Argüello Manresa

*Participatory Computer-Based Art and Distributed
Creativity: the Case of Tactical Media* 46-67

Zsolt Bátori

Photographic Deception 68-78

Alessandro Bertinetto

Gombrich, Danto, and the Question of Artistic Progress 79-92

Stefan Bird-Pollan

Benjamin's Artwork Essay from a Kantian Perspective 93-103

The Branch Collective

Towards Gesture as Aesthetic Strategy 104-114

Camille Buttingsrud <i>Thinking Toes...? Proposing a Reflective Order of Embodied Self-Consciousness in the Aesthetic Subject</i>	115-123
Ilinca Damian <i>On What Lies Beneath the Process of Creation</i>	124-136
Wiebke Deimling <i>Moralism about Propaganda</i>	137-147
Daniel Dohrn <i>According to the Fiction: A Metaexpressivist Account</i>	148-171
Damla Dönmez <i>Saving 'Disinterestedness' in Environmental Aesthetics: A Defense against Berleant and Saito</i>	172-187
Luis Eduardo Duarte Valverde <i>Net.Art as Language Games</i>	188-196
Colleen Fitzpatrick <i>Empathy, Anthropomorphism and Embodiment in Vischer's Contribution to Aesthetics</i>	197-209
Jane Forsey <i>Form and Function: The Dependent Beauty of Design</i>	210-220
James Garrison <i>The Aesthetic Life of Power: Recognition and the Artwork as a Novel 'Other'</i>	221-233
Aviv Reiter & Ido Geiger <i>Kant on Form, Function and Decoration</i>	234-245
Carmen González García <i>Facing the Real: Timeless Art and Performative Time</i>	246-258

Nathalie Heinich <i>Beyond Beauty: The Values of Art — Towards an Interdisciplinary Axiology</i>	259-263
Kai-Uwe Hoffmann <i>Thick Aesthetic Concepts — Neue Perspektiven</i>	264-279
Gioia Laura Iannilli <i>The Aesthetics of Everyday Life: Suggestions for a Reconsideration of Aesthetics in the Age of Wearable Technologies</i>	280-296
Jèssica Jaques Pi <i>Repenser Picasso. Le Désir Attrapé par la Queue et les Iconographies Culinaires de l’Absurde et de la Stupeur</i>	297-316
Mojca Küplen <i>Art and Knowledge: Kant’s Perspective</i>	317-331
Iris Laner <i>Science, Art, and Knowing-How: Merleau-Ponty on the Epistemic Qualities of ‘Experimental Practices’</i>	332-362
Regina-Nino Mion <i>The Unpredictability of the Political Effect of Art</i>	363-369
Vitor Moura <i>Kundry Must Die — Stage Direction and Authenticity</i>	370-390
Michaela Ott <i>Aesthetics as Individual Affections</i>	391-405
E. L. Putnam <i>‘Bring a Camera with You’: The Posthumous Collaboration of Ahmed Basiomy and Shady El Noshokaty</i>	406-415
James Risser <i>Sensible Knowing in Kant’s Aesthetics</i>	416-427

Salvador Rubio Marco <i>Philosophizing through Moving-Image Artworks: An Alternative Way Out</i>	428-438
Lisa Katharin Schmalzried <i>Beauty and the Sensory-Dependence-Thesis</i>	439-463
Niklas Sommer <i>Schiller's Interpretation of the 'Critique of the Power of Judgement' — A Proposal</i>	464-475
Tak-Lap Yeung <i>Hannah Arendt's Interpretation of Kant's 'Judgment' and its Difficulties</i>	476-493
Elena Tavani <i>Giacometti's 'Point to the Eye' and Merleau-Ponty's Painter</i>	494-511
Daniel Tkatch <i>Transcending Equality: Jacques Rancière and the Sublime in Politics</i>	512-528
Connell Vaughan <i>Authorised Defacement: Lessons from Pasquino</i>	529-551
Oana Vodă <i>Is Gaut's Cluster Account a Classificatory Account of Art?</i>	552-562
Katarzyna Wejman <i>Plot and Imagination Schemata, Metaphor and Aesthetic Idea — A Ricoeurian Interpretation of the Kantian Concept of Imagination</i>	563-578
Zsófia Zvolenszky <i>Artifactualism and Inadvertent Authorial Creation</i>	579-593

Giacometti's 'Point to the Eye' and Merleau-Ponty's Painter

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ABSTRACT. In this essay I argue that the *realization* of the visible through painting, suggested by Merleau-Ponty in *Eye and Mind* (painting “gives visible existence to what profane vision thinks is invisible”), finds in Alberto Giacometti’s works and writings a support of peculiar interest to illuminate the double-bind operation of both recording and expressing how reality touches and questions the viewer. Moreover, beyond any simply ‘chiasmatic’ realization of being, Giacometti’s *poietic* response to the ‘impact’ with reality and the descriptions of visual ‘truth’ offered in his *Écrits* make clear, by means of two ‘pictorial’ and ‘plastic’ ideas, “likeness” and “depth”, both the necessity to overcome the presence of generally unnoticed images or acquired knowledge (that prevent vision to reach, in as unprejudiced way as possible, the experience of a vision), and the possibility to extend the access of seeing to a differentiation of the visible which implies – not far from Merleau-Ponty’s late views on Nature – the ontological presupposition of an instable and ‘relational’ Being.

I. To See Directly

Alberto Giacometti’s *Pointe à l’œil* (1932) is a wood and metal sculpture, made up of a plane on which a long pointed spear hits a small globe in a hollow. The sculpture dates back to his Surrealist period. This work is one of those “Objects of Symbolic Function” described by Salvador Dalí in his pioneering article on Surrealist objects published in 1931 in Andre Breton’s journal “Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution”: objects able to reference the sublimated impulses and desires elicited in the viewer – like Giacometti’s famous *Suspended Ball* (1930).

No doubt that in *Point to the Eye* the dreamlike matter-of-factness of the link between ocular and death drives and the sadistic image of a pointed

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stick aiming at an eye globe still reminds of Surrealist production of sexual fetishes, easily recognizable in Giacometti's "disagreeable objects" too.

Joining the Surrealist group in Paris in the Thirties, Giacometti learns how to de-realize the object, how to free vision from the frames set up by its familiarity, as well as a reluctance to adapt to patterns of division – subject-object, conscious-unconscious, near-far.

In this respect Giacometti's *Point to the Eye* actually heralds a collapse of vision against a putatively fixed visual order, it points to the problem the Swiss artist struggled with through all the different phases of his artistic development: how to render a figure within a space. It announces, losing touch with (and reliance in) 'objective' proportions of things, Giacometti's "crises" of perception, and ultimately his phenomenological approach to vision.

Giacometti seems to agree with Merleau-Ponty when the latter in his *Phenomenology of Perception* admits that nothing is more difficult than 'knowing exactly' what we are seeing. Various elements of Giacometti's theory and practice of vision agree with Merleau-Ponty's theories, which to a certain extent can be also ascribed to the popularity of phenomenology in the French philosophic environment of the 1930s and 1940s in Paris, the city Giacometti lived in from 1922 on. The philosopher and the artist met actually in Paris several times and Giacometti drew a philosopher's head, *Heraclit*, for the frontispiece of Merleau-Ponty's edited anthology *Les Philosophes célèbres* (1956).

Even if we could say that Giacometti traces an entirely personal phenomenological path, the conditions for a non-casual encounter between the philosopher's and the artist's positions about the "style of perception" carried on by painting are somehow strengthened by the fact that in the 1940s Merleau-Ponty has already discovered the specific philosophical dimension of "painting".

With Cézanne, like with Braque, Juan Gris and Picasso, "painting brings us back to the vision of things themselves", which means that its objects "do not flow under our gaze like known objects", but "force it to stop, they question it, oddly communicate their secreta substance, their very material nature".

On the basis of this phenomenological import, painting is able to exhibit the same "style of perceptive experience" that, according to Merleau-

Ponty, philosophy as phenomenology should reach as well. But what kind of style is it?

The issue is not a minor one. Merleau-Ponty's seems to suggest that "it's the style of the gaze's reversibility, what I could call the other side of the collapse of vision", a style which enables the painter to "recover and show the very birth of a landscape" or of any other vision, without this having to pay a tribute to the law of geometric perspective for it. In this respect the 'Cézanne's doubt' is turned into a strategy and into a style. If, as stated by classical teaching, Cézanne does not distinguish drawing from colour and states that "when you paint, you draw", it is because "he wants to generate the outline and the shape of objects in the same way as nature generates them under our eyes, that is through the composition of colours". Different points of view are now co-existing in the various sections of the painting, giving the impression of a "perspective error" which vanishes if, at a close look, we are able to catch the span existing between one part of the painting and the other: the being "appears and shows through across time".

What about Giacometti? Can we state that 'the style of perception' mentioned by Merleau-Ponty concerns Giacometti's painting and sculpture as well? Questioned by Parinaud on the sense of his artistic venture, Giacometti answers in a way that deserves attention. After remarking that "voir, comprendre le monde, le sentir intensément" (Seeing, understanding, feeling the world intensely) is the one single reason that urges one to undertake art, he confirms that in almost all painting "au fond la vision se rapporte surtout aux couleurs" (after all, vision is especially related to colours). It is as if Giacometti subscribed to Merleau-Ponty's idea whereby the way in which painting experiences the world may be described as a 'perceptive style'.

First of all however, it's the 'pointing of the eye' which conveys the same idea of an intensive contact or an "impact" with the world that Merleau-Ponty will mention in his *Eye and Mind*, when describing the affection of being hurt by reality, which for him, however, paradoxically also means to "have at a distance". The eye "is that which has been moved by some impact of the world, which it then restores to the visible through the traces of a hand".

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and ontology of painting from "Céz-

anne's Doubt" to "Eye and Mind" and Alberto Giacometti's work are engaged, so to say, in the same struggle for 'vision', starting from Cézanne's "doubt" about a prejudiced true naturalness of perception. The whole question however is not simply based on the primacy of perception and the living body: this insight in fact maintains a dichotomy between consciousness and objects, the dualism mind-body that Merleau-Ponty's flesh-ontology aims to overcome *through painting*.

In addressing our relationship to things, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes incompleteness, process, failure – rather than wholeness or mastery. In *L'Œil et l'esprit* Merleau-Ponty quotes twice Giacometti's remarks (on likeness and on depth) to point out how his work can be considered as paradigmatic for discussion about the way reality 'perform' as appearance, engaging the viewer in somatic and constructive participation. What is here at stake is the artist's attempt to "make the vision", to configure perception in the interplay of sensual materiality with the body and imagination of the viewer, through a 'poietic' response to the experience of being 'stung in the eye' by reality.

In Giacometti's *Point to the Eye* the object, thing or body, acting as a point and actually striking on the eye, involves it in a response that includes the responsive concern to recognise the object – which means to grasp its display as a figure in space, *in relation to* both the artist's eye and the positioning of bodies, revealing itself at first as something being unknown, non-familiar and therefore as a somehow threatening object.

This points to the elemental and crucial problem how to "see directly" (Giacometti), to prevent vision to be influenced by all possible 'mediations'.

Merleau-Ponty speaks of a "pre-logic" connection underlying our perception and expression, able to mine all our conceptualizations of the observable world: a "primordial order of signification". But the question for us is: how is this primary order intertwined with the discipline of art-making and how does it eventually find expression in it?

In Giacometti, because it entails the possibility to receive the real that 'awakens' the eye, the gaze inevitably clashes with knowledge, with anything trying to "mentally correct" the image. Giacometti tries to portray what he sees (for example, the head before him) without having recourse to what he "knows": this is where the labour of Sisyphus begins, the uneven

and always, at least partly, vain fight. The clash between seeing and knowing leads Giacometti to *question the totality* of vision. In the experience of perception there is an element of the image that is seen as “fundamental thing” and that makes up its focus. This is why he defines the Roman bust as ‘cold’: it is as if it rejected attention, as if it refused any concrete support to it; “Cézanne is right instead, adds Giacometti, when he draws a longer arm to his *Man (Boy) in the red waistcoat*, because in this case he saw the arm as a fundamental thing. The same goes (...) for the sculptors of New Guinea, who enhance in man what they have seen rather than what they know already”.

From *Pointe à l'oeil* to Giacometti's artistic production in the 1950s, his concern for a ‘rough’ contact of the sensory with the world grows into the explicit need to see the external world *directly*, and not through the lens of any acquired knowledge. Which actually didn't mean to deprive perception of the knowledge component (of the eye and of the hand), but rather to open it up to a certain freedom from conventions and to permeability to sensory data. To satisfy this need of vision, however, requires first of all to deactivate precisely that knowledge which suggests to the mind the image of an object in its “objective dimension”, thus preventing an experience of vision as exploration, excavation, novelty, discovery of a head or a figure, on this side of its ‘full size’. Which brings Giacometti to an endless positioning, measuring and working on the proportions of the figure and its parts, to a steady balancing of distances, together with to the sensory experience of both the light strokes and the digging in the yielding mass of clay, the crossed lines on a sheet of paper, a lasting contact established with any surface while marking or carving it. According to Giacometti, to see “directly” means to see by drawing, painting, modelling.

2. Likeness

Uncertainty, the doubt concerning the final choice of formal solutions to the problem of representing what the artist “sees”, steady coupled Giacometti's efforts. “I just try to construct a head, nothing more” he used to say, though “I don't know exactly what I see”. Giacometti's idea of a residual vision that the artist displays in a collapsing space through accumulation of *taches* of colour or graphic signs corresponds to his effort to

take apart seeing from given knowledge: an 'art of doubting' proving very near to Cézanne's "perceptive style", as Merleau-Ponty calls it.

Throughout his career Giacometti emphasizes the long lasting effort to manipulate a living thing into existence out of a lifeless material, canvas, colours, clay. To him as an artist the problem of the relationship of man's eye and object asked again and again for a 'poiètic' and not only visual response. The seemingly unbearable difficulty is overcome by Giacometti through a peculiar strategy: the seeking for "likeness".

While returning to the same figures and the same models, he interestingly claims that his work consists in searching for "absolute likeness". But he actually describes likeness as a tool, an instrument, even as a sort of weapon, rather than a *telos*: for the simple reason that truth interested him much more than art: "what interests me in all paintings is likeness – that is what likeness is for me: something that makes me uncover the external world a little".

What is remarkable here is that we find the same passage, taken from Giacometti's *Écrits*, quoted by Merleau-Ponty in his *Eye and Mind*.

Merleau-Ponty's assumption, which he already expressed in *Phenomenology of Perception*, is that perception is required to get "access to truth", and is not adapted thought or apodictic consciousness: it rather provides the foundation of being as a world. On this basis, according to Merleau-Ponty, philosophy, just like art, has to perform as a "realization of a truth" rather than as the reflection of a preliminary truth. In this respect Giacometti's "thinking through vision" can be related to Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception as a "primordial operation", though Giacometti's vision remains *residual*, while Merleau-Ponty's primordial perception is supposed to imbue the sensory with sense, that is to say, to capture an immanent sense in the sensory before any judgment, while "true philosophy consists in learning again to see the world". Which means here "to enter a universe of beings *showing themselves*" as such. As far as I can see them, says Merleau-Ponty, these things remain "homes" open to my gaze. (...) I can see an object since the objects make up a system or a world, and each of them arranges other objects around itself as spectators of its hidden aspects and guarantee of their permanence. A step aside however is set down by the painter, who "interrogates" the object of his painting "with his gaze", so that his vision is "an ongoing birth".

Particularly eloquent about the individualization related to such a 'birth' is the title chosen by Merleau-Ponty for the sixth of the seven radio lectures transmitted by French national Radio Broadcasting Company in autumn 1948, in the programme "*Heure de culture française*". The conversation was entitled "Art and the Perceived World". Merleau-Ponty's main purpose was to reassert that "in this world it's impossible to separate things from the way they appear". That's why the experience of a work of art is perception just like the experience of a table. Therefore, if I "put myself in the hands of the school of perception, I'll be able to understand a work of art, because it too is a fleshy whole whose meaning is not free – so to say – but tied to, prisoner of all the marks, of all the details which make it manifest to me". If I perceive a table, I'm not in search of a 'definition' that would make me "draw to the essence of the table" only to lose interest in the "way the table looks and the way in which it performs its specific function". According to Merleau-Ponty the way which is accessible to perception instead – the way in which a certain table "supports its plane", as "the single movement from the legs to the top which opposes heaviness" and which makes every table different from any other.

As far as art is concerned, the key to have access to a work of art and its power is "that the form and the content, what is said and the way in which it is said, cannot be separated"; thus it means "to perceive a painting following the unspoken indications of all its parts which the traces of paint on the canvas show me, until all of them, with no words or reasoning, come together in a rigorous arrangement in which you feel nothing is arbitrary". This is true for poetry, or for the cinema, each work being a "sensory thing" with its own overall pace to be captured through perception and with its only indirect relation to ideas or natural things. In this respect painting issues a challenge. The challenge (and the enigma) concerns vision's being immersed in the texture of cross-references and bonds that keep us close to things but also being hit and awakened by the real, urged to respond.

3. Depth

Alongside 'likeness', the second topic that Merleau-Ponty's explicitly derives from Giacometti and quotes in his *Eye and Mind* is 'depth'. In the

same interview (with Charbonnier), Giacometti talks about Cézanne's painting in these terms: "I believe Cézanne was seeking depth all his life". What does it mean? Responding to the artist's gaze which challenges the familiar appearance, doesn't recognise it, and keeps on trying to see, what appears moves away, Giacometti says, in the "direction of depth".. And what about the case that a 'wall of images' materialise between the artist's eye and a genuine experience of seeing? How can the obstacle be removed? Giacometti says: "the more I looked at the model, the thicker the screen between me and reality became. You start seeing the person posing, but little by little all possible sculptures come to you (...) – reach and hit your mind – I didn't know who or what I was seeing any more".

In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception the object is already without contours: an object is an organism of colours, of smells, of sounds, of touch appearances. In Merleau-Ponty's *Eye and Mind* the concern about vision and painting deepens its critical explorations related to the world now inscribed in an ontological underlying search. Now the world, the world filtered by the painter, can't be viewed as a system any more: the world has *to scatter* to show itself, it has to renounce to geometrical perspective and to a proper field of perception.

Following Giacometti's remark about Cézanne's lifelong seeking for 'depth' Merleau-Ponty's suggests that in pursuing "depth" Cézanne was looking for a "deflagration of Being", the form taking shape, in Cézanne's paintings, from an unprecedented crossing of volumes and colours.

The point, I think, is here the question of what appearance is, of what becomes apparent to a subject if the sensory opens itself to a situated and impermanent being. Giacometti's feelings in relation to what once was apparent to him were unlike any he had had before. In his mature works he never stopped struggling with the permutations of being, dislocating and locating again each figure a thousand times. In his conversation with André Parinaud, Giacometti claims that in portraying someone or something "l'aventure, la grande aventure, c'est de voir surgir quelque chose d'inconnu chaque jour, dans le même visage". He insists on this topic in his conversation with Isaku Yanaihara: "plus on voit le visage avec densité, plus l'espace qui l'entoure devient immense".

In *Eye and Mind* 'depth' describes the experience of Merleau-Ponty's painter, insofar the attempt to translate experience of the perceived world

into the artistic work shows “that is impossible, in this world, to separate things from their way of appearing”. In this respect, it sounds rather strange for depth to be still understood as “the experience of the reversibility of dimensions”. I see things, Merleau-Ponty maintains, “in their exteriority, known through their envelopment, and their mutual dependence in their autonomy”.

As we know, according to late Merleau-Ponty, the exteriority of a thing that envelops another thing, or “of the visible on the seeing body” is “flesh”. Not mere matter, but rather the matrix of sensory relationships and of shifting, sliding or revolving that may bring about metamorphoses or revolutions in the visible and sensory. Nevertheless, however, if applied to the painter’s world, the categories of reversibility, fold and ‘chiasm’ prove to be still too mechanical and static: sliding and shifting don’t seem to be able to describe depth as ontological device. To legitimate something like a “deflagration of being” it’s necessary, I believe, to stress (as Giacometti does) its being first related to a preliminary clash or “impact” with the object of vision, affecting the gaze with blindness, and then related to the presence of invisibility as impulse, energy produced by work of art as a *relational-being*.

In Merleau-Ponty’s theory on *The Visible and the Invisible*, ‘depth’ refers to the latency of being, it has to be understood as another name for ‘*chair*’ (‘flesh’). Its remaining concealed or its non-being-expressed doesn’t simply depend on the fact that the visible of the moment cannot clearly exhaust the visible as such, but on the circumstance that the Visible (and touchable) doesn’t restrict itself to concealing or presupposing the Invisible, but paradoxically *presents* the Invisible as an absence. The visible lets the ‘agency’ of the invisible become visible through bodies and things looking for individuation through relationship.

Therefore, when Merleau-Ponty calls the sensory “in-visible”, he doesn’t primarily mean what is ordinarily concealed from view, but what is inaccessible to scientific or “operational” thinking, as it is the case of the Cartesian framework of the description and explanation of the world. Thus latency or depth, the being-concealed of something, offering itself as the experience of a non-geometrical depth, must be not only the invisible implied in the visible, the inaccessible “wrapped” in the accessible, but the overlapping of being as exposure of an interplay of multiple beings and

images.

We know that according to Merleau-Ponty painting can throw a pre-human look onto things, provided that it does not take on a representative or illusionistic, a banally mimetic, or 'allusive', analogic attitude.

Looking at things in this horizon, however, we still don't have sufficient elements to understand how painting can be realised as a search for depth, that is as "dimension giving the object to us (...) as full of reserves and as inexhaustible reality". With respect to this, we are supported by the cases of this "presence of the invisible in the visible" when it is Cézanne who "outlines" "*several* contours" and not just one contour of the apple he is painting, but also when Giacometti puts into action an inexhaustible sign filling with graphics the figure to be drawn.

In this regard, Cézanne and Giacometti 'see' in the same way, that way that leads depth to "deflagrate", with an 'inexhaustible sign' responding to invisibility raising the visible. To some extent, Merleau-Ponty's recourse to painting and to the notion of 'depth' drives him to explain an enigma by means of another enigma; to hint to the enigma of an "ontology of the flesh" through the enigma of visibility, without actually explaining what could've been raised by painting in terms of individuation of a being.

On the basis of all the elements gathered and for the purposes of the present paper we can highlight three main points: 1) the interrogation of the gaze; 2) the modulation of instability; 3) the overlapping.

Let's start from the 1st point: it is the gaze that asks the thing how it has access to visibility, how it becomes a thing. The painter who is able to realize this request captures this 'how' in the structure of a thing, in the way it gets tangled up, bends and stretches. It is necessary however to understand if the "interrogations" that Merleau-Ponty sees "spreading" through the world because of continuous gazes are nothing, in painting, but a way to get perceptively and operationally prepared to the surfacing of a module, of a form of instability, of a self-affection that finds an expression: construction from the inside. Which brings us to the 2nd point mentioned, the possible modulation of instability through painting, which to Giacometti means a modulation of likeness. Surprisingly, Giacometti has no doubts that "the bust wishes to be resembling", that the creation of a face, of a life figure or the drawing of an object always wishes to be a

portrait, that is to say demands to “resemble to someone” or something. What is to be found, then, is nothing but a determined, and therefore technical, answer to what a lightly marked canvas, or a rough-hewn sculpture ask again and again, raising new problems at every working session (“plus je travaille, plus je vois autrement”). In other words, Giacometti’s search for likeness proves to be in itself an osmotic exchange between the artist’s eye (and hand) and reality, in order to satisfy, from both sides, the impelling need to have access to an object asking it to go through ‘depth’, the latency of being, and *appear*.

Cézanne had already drawn attention to the fact that even the most ordinary objects have their own features, which are ever-changing and such as to interact with the other objects and the observer actively. Therefore, even and precisely a glass, a chair, a lamp or a room ask to be portrayed, rather than simply pictured or represented on paper or on canvas. Hence the need to enter their inner animation, to catch them at the very moment when they dialogue with the other objects appearing or hiding themselves and with the eye of the observer.

Thus ‘likeness’, as related to the interrogation of the gaze, is not meant as correspondence (of the drawing with the model); rather, it is viewed as the acquisition, by means of the line drawn on the sheet of paper or the fingerprint on the clay mass, of a measure of proximity to a certain perceptive truth, to the knowledge that has become part of the vision, to the living contact with the object. A measure of seeing to be constructed with lines, planes, surfaces.

4. The Cage

In his attempt to find a solution to the problem of proportions, a real priority to him, Giacometti comes across Egyptian art and Byzantine icons. In both there is a stylisation of the real that appears to him as extraordinarily ‘realistic’ because of its ability to formalise the abbreviations or partial focuses that perception opposes to the enormousness and inaccessibility of the real, and that it captures, delivering them to a vision regulated by style.

“If I would made (*si je faisais*) thoroughly the perception I have of you” he once said to David Sylvester “I would make a very flat, barely modu-

lated sculpture, which would be much closer to a sculpture of the Cyclades, that has a stylised look, than to one of Rodin's or Houdon's sculptures, which look real (...). In any case, when I look at it, it looks more like a byzantine or one of Cézanne's heads than to a Titian". Giacometti was firmly persuaded that ancient art, or pre-Renaissance art (Greek, Egyptian, Sumerian, Byzantine art) had produced a "closeness to truth" which is impossible for modern artists to achieve.

Referring to *La Cage* in 1950, Giacometti told Pierre Matisse that the sculpture was meant to portray a room, a naked woman and a male bust inside, as well as something else: "it is the wish to abolish the base, the attempt to have a limited space to better realise a head and a figure". All the figures are *resserré* – in Giacometti's words – in the artificial space of the cage. In a wider sense, he never stopped having recourse to the cage of style, to a geometric, formalised space, like Egyptian or Byzantine artists did, though Giacometti, as a modern artist, couldn't create one on his own. His sculptures remain "in a fixed, arbitrary form", like a Sumerian head or a Fayum mummy portrait, with the eyes "on the horizon, the curve of the eyes, the separation of the ears" clearly marked by style, which can later create, through the material used in painting or in sculpture, those "approaches", *rapprochements* to the subject, which bring us again to 'likeness'.

It is no coincidence, then, that the figurative art Giacometti often states is farthest from his idea of *rassemblance* remains Renaissance art, while the art which is closest to 'real' vision is the most stylised art – "Egyptian or Byzantine painting, which keep enthraling me, or the Fayum mummy portraits or the Roman painting of Pompeii".

Giacometti somehow brings together the typically 20th century impulse to destroy the figure and all canons and the need to set up a cage, or at least a spatial reference grid for the framing of faces or figures. And, at the same time, he shows an unwillingness to restore the life and animation provided, in different ways, by Medieval fixed images and the physiognomic painting of Pompeii and of el Fayum.

Questioned by the interviewer (David Sylvester) on the reason for such greater resemblance in byzantine art, Giacometti gives the example of the "byzantine head", clearly an icon, where the "base of the nose" and the "construction of the eye" are more similar to the way in which he actually 'sees' them.

This means to “provide sculptures with a gaze» «without imitating the eye”, warns Giacometti. Thus the truth of life seems to lie in a gaze whose truth does not appear thanks to the eye’s construction, but somehow despite the fact that the eye is constructed.

Following what I have said on the proportions of the face and of the figures in Giacometti’s portraits, speaking of “naïveté” of vision is questionable. Admittedly, Giacometti’s doubts on how to create a head seem to have quite annoyed André Breton, who is reported to have replied: “everybody knows what a head looks like”. As Arthur Danto remarked, in fact the issue concerns not so much what a head looks like, but rather “the way it looks when its owner is looking at an object”. However, I contend with Danto’s hypothesis that Giacometti’s way to represent life ‘directly’ consists in exhibiting “not what things look like, but how they show themselves in their awareness of the world”. This is only one side of the coin. The other side implies the *dimensioning* of what appears. I don’t think we can comprehend the issue raised by the living character of the subject without putting into account at the same time the issue raised by style: both of which are constantly considered by Giacometti. The two issues – the life to be captured and the cage to hold it, that is to say the geometry deriving from style – must be imagined within the process of constructing a *field of vision* which is not quite naïve or ‘brute’ in Merleau-Ponty’s sense. In fact, the field of vision in which Giacometti’s figures and busts finally find a placement, a proportion, a scale, a solution for the plastic problem of gaze, cannot only be the result of a permeability of the gaze to the flesh of the world, of a communication of equivalents. To this extent, Merleau-Ponty views the artist’s freedom as nothing but tuning in with nature’s freedom, which is creativity of expression, “a power to invent the visible” and “self-production of meaning”. However, while we may consider Giacometti’s artistic and theoretical universe as responding to Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of “opening” and “dispossessing” that make the visibility of the invisible possible, whereby vision happens within ourselves as a continuous birth, a problem arises for the “system of equivalents” by which Merleau-Ponty actually arranges the “flesh of the world” into a bodily schema.

5. Ontology of an Instable Being

Let's reach at last the 3rd point, the question of overlapping as the internal differentiation of being, relationship as osmotic exchange.

In contrast with Merleau-Ponty's descriptions concerning this schematizing outcome of the seer-seen reversible relationship, Giacometti's works and thinking seem to correspond more deeply to Merleau-Ponty's late Nature ontology than to flesh-ontology. While the latter remains tied to an imaginary of fluidity and reversibility in being, Nature, overwhelming the living beings, produces new gatherings and new individuals, while new images can be grasped, joining the very nature of painting. Which has not very much to do with a reversibility of being, but rather with the same "instable balance or movement" that let nature open and dispossess itself.

From here, it seems to me, originates the understanding of what Merleau-Ponty means by "new reversibility" in *Eye and Mind*: it is neither a mere reciprocal relationship between the seer and the seen, intertwined in a chiasm-like relation, nor a simple enveloping piling up latent contents which alternatively turn into 'folds', or cavities, where a visible thing would surface from over and over again.

Merleau-Ponty claims that painting provides the substance of the world, the flesh, with a peculiar vision capability deriving from the interposition of the painter's "body". The painter "interrogates" the object of his painting "with his gaze". "Une sculpture n'est pas un objet, elle est une interrogation, une question, une réponse" echos Giacometti.

We would say, nowadays, that the painter's body works as an 'interface' between different screens, or 'gazes'. Compared to simple vision, the painter contributes not only the hand supporting the eye, which is an operational act supporting perception: s/he adds movement through her/his own moving body. This enables her/his to create around a moving density, a simultaneous overlapping of objects, gazes and vectors. In this respect, the recourse to vision in Cézanne or Giacometti stem from the same rejection not only of the ordered vision in terms of perspective, but of the allusive function of the trait, line or mark of colour. What takes shape in painting here is not a reference to objects (recognisable 'despite' they were only an image alluding to things), but an experience of listening and, we

may say, of “active waiting” for things to find an expression *in the materials* and the forms the painter makes available for their appearance as visual and sensory phenomena.

In his final course (1959-1960) about the idea of nature Merleau-Ponty explains it in the following terms: “there is only the multiple, and this totality that surges from it is not a totality in potential, but the establishment of a certain dimension”. The philosophical import of Giacometti’s work and thinking communicates precisely with Merleau-Ponty’s ontological theory of Nature, phenomenologically described as “overlapping”.

Giacometti’s dimensional crises inheres this issue as a capacity to give account of the genesis of form in a way that “escapes from the dilemma of being and nonbeing”, like in nature the organism. In his placements and displacements of figures, a positive emptiness is inseparable from the determination of a place *because of* the enveloping of the body subject with the natural world.

In Giacometti’s words, this means that “les signes, même les signes du passé, ne se stabilisent jamais. Ils surgissent. Ils disparaissent”. It also means, however, that listening is not enough for the painter: s/he must capture the essence of the being, make depth easily seen through. To do so, Giacometti explains, cages must be set up.

Giacometti teaches that a perceptive style supported by the framework of the reversibility of gazes is not enough to a painter. He also needs dimensional boxes, devices capturing the expression of being. Only in the way indicated painting can become the interface enabling the appearing of forces to be expressed as an explosion of visions provided with their own structure. “L’espace n’existe pas, il faut le créer”.

Through painting, says Merleau-Ponty, we catch “the voluminosity” of a thing, the enigma of its being-there in its autonomy and at the same time in its mutual dependence with other things: I see things that “eclipse one another”. A dimensionality of Being comes forward as a depth that takes up the structure of an overlapping, actually the only concrete pattern that Merleau-Ponty inserts to describe phenomenologically the “new reversibility” announced by painting. Where spatiality is not only tied to one’s own body and motility, but to impossible views: it becomes organ of an ontology of an instable being.

Les têtes. Les personnages, ne sont que mouvement continu du dedans, du dehors, ils se refont sans arrêt, ils n'ont pas une vraie consistance, leur côté transparent. (...) Elles sont ni cube, ni cylindre, ni sphère, ni triangle. Elles sont une masse en mouvement, forme changeante et jamais tout à fait saisissable (...) une réalité sans mesure, dans une espace sans limites.

On one hand Giacometti seems actually to embody, in Cézanne's footprints, the role of the Painter as described in *Eye and Mind*, but on the other, with his drawings, paintings, sculptures and also his statements about vision, he illuminates, even beyond the philosopher's explanations dedicated to this issue, Merleau-Ponty's idea of the "new reversibility" of painting. Displacements and placements of Giacometti's figures realizing we may say, the ontological idea of a relational-space where the construction of likeness and the construction of depth come together in the density of a space saturated by interpenetration of visible and invisible signs and agencies.

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