The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths

Rosalind E. Krauss

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
To describe Giacometti’s *Invisible Object* as “a young girl with knees half-bent as though offering herself to the beholder (a pose suggested to the sculptor by the attitude once assumed by a little girl in his native land)” is to participate in the work of rewriting his beginnings that Giacometti himself started in the 1940s. But this cooperation on the part of Michel Leiris, as he constructed the text for the sculptor’s 1951 exhibition catalogue, placing *Invisible Object* in the service of a simple transparency to the observable world, is an expression of the ruptures and realignments that were transforming postwar Paris.¹ For this description is a slap in the face of André Breton.

Who can forget the magisterial example through which Breton opens the world of *L’amour fou* onto the strange but impressive workings of objective chance? Giacometti and Breton go to the flea market where each one is “claimed” by a seemingly useless object that each is impelled, as though against his will, to buy. Giacometti’s purchase was a sharply angled, warriorlike mask, for which neither he nor Breton could determine the exact, original use.² However, the point of the example was not the object’s initial but its ultimate destination. This, according to Breton’s account, was in the service of resolving the conflicts paralyzing Giacometti as he attempted to bring parts of *Invisible Object* into focus. The head, particularly, had resisted integration with the rest of the work, and it was to this problem that the mask seemed to address itself. “The purpose of the mask’s intervention,” wrote Breton, “seemed to be to help Giacometti overcome his indecision in this regard. We should note that here the finding of the object strictly serves the same function as that of a dream, in that it frees the individual from paralyzing emotional scruples, comforts him, and makes him understand that the obstacle he thought was insurmountable has been cleared.”³ In Breton’s account, then, the world of real objects has

³. Breton, *Documents #4*, 20.


*Figure*. Bougainville, Solomon Islands. Painted wood, 69 inches high. Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel.
nothing to do with an art of mimesis; the objects are in no sense models for the sculptor's work. The world is instead a great reserve against which to trace the workings of the unconscious, the litmus paper that makes it possible to read the corrosiveness of desire. Without the mask, the dream, Giacometti could no more have finished *Invisible Object* than Breton, without his own *trouvaile* from the market, could have entered the written world of *L'amour fou*.

But the little Swiss girl of Giacometti's later recollection (and Leiris's account) has nothing to do with this key example of the marvelous and objective chance. By serving as a direct, real-world model for a work of art, the little Swiss girl withdraws *Invisible Object* from the orbit of surrealism and places it in the postwar realm of Giacometti's studio, as he notoriously strained, month after month, through trial and retrial, to catch the likeness of the model posed in front of him. Recontextualizing the work, setting it in relation to a new group of friends and allies, like Sartre and Genet, Leiris's account draws it closer to the problematic of *The Phenomenology of Perception* and further from that of *Les vases communicants*.

This a-chronicity is, of course, unacceptable to the historian, and thus Reinhold Hohl, the leading scholar of Giacometti's work, does not even mention the memory of the Swiss child in discussing this masterpiece of the sculptor's prewar career. But then Breton's story is, for Hohl, equally suspect. "Contrary to Breton's account," he begins, "that a mysterious object found at the fleamarket (it was, in fact, the prototype for an iron protection mask designed by the French Medical Corps in the First World War) had helped the artist to find his forms, Giacometti had borrowed the stylized human shapes from a Solomon Islands *Seated Statue of a Deceased Woman* which he had seen at the Ethnological Museum in Basel, and had combined them with other elements of Oceanic art, such as the bird-like demon of death.""4

Despite the certainty of his tone, Hohl's evidence for this connection is both scant and indirect. In 1963 Giacometti had spoken to an interviewer of a reconstructed Oceanic house installed in the Basel Museum. Since the Solomon Islands figure had been displayed in the same gallery early in the 1930s, when it was brought back to Switzerland from the expedition that had plucked it from the South Seas, Hohl could at least assume Giacometti's knowledge of the

---

4. One of these sisters wrote a detailed account of this process, observing that "[a]s much as it was then expressed in the particular acts of painting and posing, there were elements of the sadomasochistic in our relationship... although it would have been difficult to determine exactly what acts were sadistic and/or masochistic on whose side and why." James Lord, *A Giacometti Portrait*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1965, p. 36.


The detail that lends the greatest credence to Hohl's claim is the schematic, railinglike support for the half-seated figure, a construction that is entirely characteristic of this type of statue and is not commonly found elsewhere. Since part of the power of the pose of Giacometti's sculpture comes from the enigmatic relation between the half-kneeling posture and the structural elements that seem to contain it—a flat plate against the shins in front of the figure and the peculiar scaffolding behind it—and since this construction is not "natural" to a model posed in a studio, the probability was always that its source was in another work of art. Because of the railing, because of the posture, because of the forward jut of the head and the articulation of the breasts, the Solomon Islands statue of Hohl's nomination seems a logical candidate.

Behind Hohl's assertion of this statue as the source for Invisible Object there is a whole reservoir of knowledge about the role of primitive art in the sculptor's work in the years leading up to 1934. Primitivism had been central to Giacometti's success in freeing himself not only from the classical sculptural tradition but also from the cubist constructions that had appeared in the early 1920s as the only logical alternative. Quite precisely, Giacometti's work matured as a function of its ability to invent in very close relation to primitive sources. Just two years after leaving Bourdelle's studio he was able to execute a figure on a major scale that was "his own" by virtue of belonging, quite profoundly, to African tribal art.

8. The statue came to the museum from the 1929-30 expedition of Felix Speiser and was published in 1933 in Führer durch das Museum für Völkerkunde Basel, Salomonen, as Figure 11 (Tuturaut, Bougainville), p. 21. In 1930 the art of the Solomon Islands was the focus of an essay in Documents that dealt with the visual and religious significance of its production. See Louis Clarke, "Art des Ïles Salomon," Documents II, no. 5 (1930).

9. See, for example, the duka figure in the British Museum, 1944, Or. 21177.

10. Hohl publishes the Solomon Islands figure in his monograph (p. 291, Figure 30) without the "railing," although this structural support appeared in the 1933 publication of the Basel Ethnological Museum. (Subsequent to this publication of the figure, the support bars were lost.) Instead Hohl postulates the influence of Egyptian statuary for the architectural elements of Invisible Object (Hohl, 1972, p. 300, fn. 54). William Rubin has suggested Sepik River spirit figures as another possible source for the structure behind the woman's body in Giacometti's sculpture. One of these, now in the Rietberg Museum (RMe 104), was in that part of the van der Heydt collection deposited in the Musée de l'Homme in 1933 and placed on display, where Giacometti may have seen it. (I owe this information to Philippe Peltier, who has generously shared with me his knowledge of the disposition of the great collections of Oceanic art of this period.) However, a vertical structure that either slants the body or appears to contain it is also found in New Ireland maulangan, an Oceanic type admired and collected by the surrealists. But neither the Sepik River nor the New Ireland sculptures relate morphologically to the smooth-surfaced, generalized anatomical style of Invisible Object. Evan Maurer suggests the presence of the Caroline Islands figurine type on the basis of stylistic similarity and because one of Giacometti's drawings after Oceanic objects represents such a figure. See Maurer, "In Quest of the Myth: An Investigation of the Relationships between Surrealism and Primitivism," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1974, p. 318. The Caroline Islands figurine type, however, does not assume the bent-knee position that is so forceful in Invisible Object, nor is it supported by any structural adjunct.
The 1927 Spoon Woman goes beyond the applied use of the modish style nègre that was influencing everything from Art Deco furniture to Léger’s theatrical curtains in the mid-1920s and which Giacometti had employed in his The Couple the year before. The decorative application of tribalizing detail to a stylized, planar background is the formal strategy of what might be called Black Deco; it is this one finds in The Couple, giving the work its generalized character of the Africo-primitive in the absence of any specific sculptural source. But moving toward a much deeper level of structural assimilation of African carved objects, Spoon Woman acknowledges the metaphor frequently put in place by Dan grain scoops, in which the bowl of the implement is likened to the lower part of the female seen as a receptacle, or pouch, or cavity. Giacometti may have seen these spoons in the years before 1927. Six spoons from Paul Guillaume’s collection were included in the massive exhibition of African and Oceanic art at the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in the winter of 1923–24. By taking the metaphor and inverting it, so that “a spoon is like a woman” becomes “a woman is like a spoon,” Giacometti was able to intensify the idea, and to universalize it by renouncing.

11. Spoon Woman is conventionally assigned to 1926 except in Hohl’s monograph where, for reasons not argued, it is dated 1927. In following Hohl’s dating, I am proposing the greater stylistic maturity, accomplishment, and thus later date of Spoon Woman, precisely on the basis of Giacometti’s developing relationship to primitive sources. The Couple, on the other hand, seems to me to participate in the stylizations à la nègre that were widespread by the early 1920s. The sketches published, for example, by Léger in L’Esprit Nouveau, no. 18 (1924) as “personnages” for La Création du monde, manifest the same generalized overall shapes (trapezoidal, oval) for the body-as-a-whole, and use the same types of ornamental detail for the indications of anatomy. Sculptors like Miklos and Lambert-Rucki, within the context of Art Deco, were producing stylized “African” masks and figurative sculptures by 1925. The designer Pierre Legrain was producing elegant furniture for clients such as Jacques Doucet, modeled directly on seats and stools from tribal Africa. These were widely published during the period, cf, Art et Décoration 1 (1924), 182. It is this stylizing attitude toward the primitive source that The Couple participates in but Spoon Woman renounces.
generalizing the forms of the sometimes naturalistic African carvings toward a more prismatic abstraction. In forcing on the Dan model the image of the woman who is almost nothing but womb, Giacometti assimilated the formal elegance of the African object to the more British conception of Stone Age fertility Venuses.15

With this celebration of the primal function of woman seen through a primitivized formal logic, Giacometti had assumed the most vanguard of positions. He found himself in concert with the aggressive anti-Western stance of the visual avant-garde, given verbal form by, for example, Georges Henri Rivière, soon to be the assistant director of the Trocadéro, when he published a panegyric to archeology—“parricide daughter of humanism”—in the initial volume of Cahiers d'Art.16 Opening with the bald statement that the miracle of Greek art had run its course, Rivière went on to say that if Louis Aragon and Jean Lurçat were now to go to Spain, unlike their fathers, their most urgent

12. Previous attempts to assign a tribal, sculptural source for the female half of The Couple seem unconvincing on the basis of conceptual and morphological comparison. Maurer suggests a Makonde reliquary figure. Cowling proposes Makonde body shields (see Maurer, p. 316, and Elizabeth Nesbit Cowling, "The Primitive Sources of Surrealism," unpublished M. A. thesis, London, the Courtauld Institute, 1970, p. 46). But however unpersuasive the specific “source” might be, the suggestions put forward by these authors attest to their experience of the Africanizing character of the figures in The Couple. This quality makes suggestions of a Neolithic source for the work, put forward by other scholars, somewhat dubious. There is a strong compositional (but not conceptual) resemblance between the female figure of The Couple and one of the monolithic figures from St. Sénan sur Kanie, a work that figures in the illustrations of the Carnac Museum catalogue of 1927. This connection was first suggested by Stephanie Poley ("Alberto Giacometti Umsetzung Archaischer Gestaltungsformen in Seinem Werk Zwischen 1925 und 1935," Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle 22 [1977], 177) and later by Alan Wilkinson (Gauguin to Moore, Primitivism in Modern Sculpture, Art Gallery of Toronto, 1981, p. 222). There are other examples of the effect of prehistoric images and objects on Giacometti’s work, most obviously in the 1931 sculpture The Caves in which the splayed hand etched onto the surface mimics the “stencil-like” palm prints of the caves. Interest in this detail from prehistoric painting is to be found everywhere in the 1920s, one famous example of which is the cover of Ozanam’s Foundation of Modern Art (1931). But in The Couple the prehistoric image, if it indeed functioned as a suggestion for the composition, has been converted into an evident style négre.


14. The Exposition de l’art indigene des colonies d’Afrique et d’Océanie, Musée des Arts Decoratifs (November 1923–January 27, 1924) was organized by André Leloir. Among the collections drawn upon for the exhibition were those of Félix Fénéon, André Lhote, Patrick-Henri Bruce, Paul Guillaume, and of course the Trocadéro. Guillaume contributed 79 objects, of which six were spoons listed as “Coute d’Ours.” Jean-Louis Paudiat believes that these must have included Dan objects. Two other spoon/women that Giacometti could have seen were: the Lega spoon in Carl Einstein, La Sculpture africaine, Paris, Editions Gres, 1922, plate 42; and the utensil illustrated in plate 3 of Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro, Primitive Negro Sculpture, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1926. The French edition of this book appeared in 1929.

15. See the copy Giacometti made of the Venus von Laussel, published in Luigi Carluccio, A Sketchbook of Interpretive Drawings, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1968, plate 2. It is difficult to date these drawings, but this page also contains the sketch-idea for Giacometti’s Trois personnages draps of 1929.
Wood.

goal would not be the Prado, but the caves of Altamira. *Spoon Woman*, contemporary with this statement, is also its confirmation.

But *Spoon Woman* is something else as well. It is what another wing of the intellectual vanguard would view as "soft" primitivism, a primitivism gone formal and therefore gutless. Indeed, to associate *Spoon Woman* with *Cahiers d'art* is to place it within the context of a formalizing conception of the primitive that we hear, for example, behind the praise Christian Zervos bestowed on Brancusi as the most successful sculptor of the postwar period. Since the great influx of black culture, Zervos wrote in 1929. "Brancusi has explored all the vistas that the Negroes have opened up to him, and which . . . permitted him to achieve pure form."16 *Spoon Woman* participates in both the sense of scale and the quality of formal reduction that Giacometti achieved, doubtless through knowledge of Brancusi's work.

One year before Giacometti made this sculpture, Paul Guillaume published a book that represented the extreme of the movement to aestheticize primitive art.17 *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, conceived under the aegis of Albert Barnes, written at the Barnes Foundation, and published in English, acknowledges as its only real precedent an analysis of the formal structure of African art.

18. Guillaume and Munro, *Primitive Negro Sculpture*. 
by Roger Fry. Because of Guillaume's prominence in the art world the book would undoubtedly have been well known in Paris even before its translation into French, and indeed, one of its illustrations may have reinforced Giacometti's conception of the woman/spoon.

Maintaining that every work of African art can be understood as the solution to a formal problem, *Primitive Negro Sculpture* presents each of its objects as "a rhythmic, varied sequence of some theme in mass, line, or surface," describing the way the geometrically conceived elements are first articulated and then unified by the plastic genius of the primitive sculptor. But what is insisted upon throughout the text is the continuous presence of a will to art, an aesthetic drive that is understood to be originary, or primal. Preceding all ideas, religious or otherwise, this instinct is the joint possession of children of all races as well as those "children" of the human race: primitive men and women. It is thus the Western child's creative play with paints, clay, and crayons that gives us access to the processes that drive primitive art. In concluding with the certainty that "it is not hard to imagine, then, the continuous development of negro art out of the free, naive play of the aesthetic impulse," Guillaume joins the aestheticizing interests of the art world to the most euphoric position of developmental psychology as that was being enunciated in the late 1920s.

Luquet's conviction that the art of children and the art of primitive men form a single category, one which contests the values of "civilized" art, was undoubtedly what interested Georges Bataille and drew him to review Luquet's book in the magazine *Documents*. At the point, however, where Bataille sharply diverges from Luquet's benign view of the forces at work behind the development of primitive figuration, we can start to take the measure of the attack launched by this wing of the radical avant-garde on the art-for-art's-sake view of primitivism. Since, as I will argue, Bataille's attitude had a great deal to do with shaping Giacometti's ultimate conception and use of primitive material, it is worth attending to his criticism of Luquet.

Luquet presents the child as having no initial figurative intentions but rather as taking pure pleasure in manifesting his own presence by dragging his dirty fingers along walls or covering white sheets of paper with scrawls. Having made these marks, the child later begins to invest parts of them with representational value. With this "reading" of the lines he has made, the child is even-

20. As one of many examples of the aestheticizing discourse that analyzed primitive art as just one moment of the collective representation of Art-in-general, and thus of the aesthetic impulse common to all humanity, see A. Ozenfant, *Foundations of Modern Art: The 19th Century* (London, 1931, French publication 1928).
ultimately able to repeat the images voluntarily. Since the basis of the interpretation is enormously schematic, what is involved is the connection of a mark with the idea of an object, a process that has to do with conception and not with resemblance. For this reason Luquet calls primitive figuration intellectual realism, reserving the term visual realism for the Western adult's preoccupation with mimesis.

Luquet's presentation of the development of prehistoric cave painting follows the same schema as that of the present-day child: random marking changes gradually to intentional patterning, which in turn gives rise to a figurative reading. Resemblance to external objects having been first “recognized” within the nonfigurative patterns, it can be elaborated and perfected over time.

In Luquet's program, then, an absolute freedom and pleasure initiates the impulse to draw; it is this instinct, not the desire to render reality, that is primal. On top of this foundation a procedure is gradually built for adjusting the mark to the conditions of representation, and within this a “system” of figuration develops with consistent characteristics over the entire domain of primitive art, whether that be the drawings of children, gralitists, aborigines, or peasants. Characteristics like the profiles of faces endowed with two eyes and two ears, or the rendering of houses and bodies as transparent in order to display their contents, or the free combination of plan and elevation, are what remain unchanged through the practice of “intellectual realism.” In Luquet's scheme, knowledge is thus generously added to pleasure.

Of course, the chronology of prehistoric art does not support Luquet's cheerful progressivism. The caves of Lascaux, with their astonishing naturalism, precede the much cruder renderings of later periods. Yet if Bataille draws his reader's attention to this obvious flaw in Luquet's scheme, it is not for reasons of historical accuracy but in order to assert something that had already become a staple of his thinking throughout his editorship of Documents, and was to continue beyond. What Bataille points to is the unequal mode of representation, within the same period, of animals and men. “The reindeer, the bison, or the horses,” Bataille attests, “are represented with such perfect detail, that if we were able to see as scrupulously faithful images of the men themselves, the strangest period of the avatars of humanity would immediately cease being the most inaccessible. But the drawings and sculptures that are charged with representing the Aignacians themselves are almost all informe and much less human than those that represent the animals; others like the Hotentot Venus are ignoble caricatures of the human form. This opposition is the same in the Magdalenian period.”

Modernist Myths

It is because "this crude and distorting art has been reserved for the human figure," that Bataille insists on its willfulness, on its status as a kind of primal vandalism wrought on the images of men. Indeed, Bataille wishes to substitute destructiveness for Luquet's serene view of the pleasure principle at work at the origin of the impulse to draw. The child's marking on walls, his scrawls on paper, all proceed from a wish to destroy or mutilate the support. In each subsequent stage of the development charted by Luquet, Bataille sees the enactment of new desire to alter and deform what is there before the subject: "Art, since it is incontestably art, proceeds in this way by successive destructions. Thus insofar as it liberates instincts, these are sadistic."23

The term that Bataille lends to generalize the phenomenon of sadism in both children's art and that of the caves is alteration, and this word, in the precision of its ambivalence, is characteristic of Bataille. Alteration derives from the Latin alter, which by opening equally onto a change of state and a change (or advancement) of time, contains the divergent significations of devolution and evolution. Bataille points out that alteration describes the decomposition of cadavers as well as "the passage to a perfectly heterogeneous state corresponding to... the tout autre, that is, the sacred, realized for example by a ghost."24 Alteration—which Bataille uses to describe the primal impulse of man's self-representation—thus becomes a concept that simultaneously leads downward and upward: like altus and sacer, the double-directed, primal concepts that interested Freud. The primal, or originary, is therefore irresolvably diffuse—fractured by an irremediable doubleness at the root of things that was, in his closeness to Nietzsche's thought, dear to Bataille. In its confounding of the logic that maintains terms like high and low, or base and sacred as polar opposites, it is this play of the contradictory that allows one to think the truth that Bataille never tired of demonstrating: that violence has historically been lodged at the heart of the sacred; that to be genuine, the very thought of the creative must simultaneously be an experience of death; and that it is impossible for any moment of true intensity to exist apart from a cruelty that is equally extreme.25

Bataille is well aware that the civilized Westerner might wish to maintain himself in a state of ignorance about the presence of violence within ancient religious practice, so that he either does not notice or does not reflect upon the

24. Ibid., p. 251. This notion of the double sense of the root word of a given concept takes into account Freud's interest in this kind of etymological study in which precisely altus and sacer are used as examples. See Freud's "Antithetical Sense of Primal Words," published in 1910 in the Jahrbuch für psychoanalytische Forschungen, vol. I, as a review of Karl Aba's Gegenbegriffe der Ursprünge. For Bataille's knowledge of this text, see Denis Hollier, La Prise de la Concorde, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, p. 240.
25. Obviously Bataille was dependent upon the ethnological data available to him at the time, from which he made his own particular selection in order to support his critique of philosophy. For a discussion of Bataille's connection to ethnography in the 1920s and '30s see Alfred Metraux, "Rencontre avec les ethnologues," Critique, no. 195-196 (1963), 677-684.
significance of the deformed anthropoids that appear in the caves, or so that he aestheticizes the whole of African art. In the first essay that he wrote on primitive civilization Bataille remarked this resistance on the part of scholars to acknowledge what is hideous and cruel in the depiction of the gods of certain peoples. The text, included in a collection of ethnological essays occasioned by the first major exhibition of pre-Columbian art in Paris (1928), was called "L'Amerique disparue," and in it Bataille tried to understand the reality behind the representation of the Aztec gods, depicted as caricatural, monstrous, and deformed. Although his knowledge of pre-Columbian culture was still rather superficial, his analysis proved to be extremely prescient, according to the ethnologist Alfred Metraux as he looked back on this early performance of Bataille's. For what Bataille could read into these images was the presence of malign and dissembling gods, trickster gods to whom was dedicated a religious fervor in which pitiless cruelty combined with black humor to create a culture of delirium: "Doubtless, a bloodier eccentricity was never conceived by human madness: crimes continually committed in broad sunlight for the sole satisfaction of god-ridden nightmares, of terrifying ghosts! The priests' cannibalistic repasts, the ceremonies with cadavers and rivers of blood—more than one historical happening evokes the stunning debaucheries described by the illustrious Marquis de Sade." Broadening the reference from Mexico to de Sade was characteristic of the intellectual field common to 1920s ethnological thinking (particularly in the circle around Marcel Mauss), with its focus on the violent performance of the sacred in Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

But in speaking of the Aztecs' insatiable thirst for blood, of their sacrificial practices in which the living victim's heart was cut out of his body and held up, still palpitating, by the priest at the altar, Bataille stresses the "astonishingly joyous character of these horrors." As in the case of the concept of alteration, the practice of sacrifice by the Aztecs allows the double condition of the sacred

26. In Jean Babelon, _L'Art précolombien_, Paris, Editions Beaux-Arts, 1930. This collection of essays was to accompany the 1928 _Exposition de l'art de l'Amérique_, in the Pavillon de Marsan and included texts by Alfred Metraux and Paul Rivet, among others. Pre-Columbian art was seen at the time as occupying a continuous field with that of Africa and Oceania; for example, in the text "L'Art négré," that Zervos wrote to introduce a special issue of _Cahiers d'art_ (no. 7-8, 1927), he speaks of "the attachment of our generation for art négré" specifying, "That is what was produced twenty years ago with Negroid sculpture, it is what is produced right now with Melanesian and pre-Columbian art" (p. 230). On this same subject Breton wrote: "The very particular interest that painters at the beginning of the 20th century had for African art, today it is American art from before the conquest that, along with Oceanic art, exerts an elective influence on artists" (Breton, _Monque_, Paris, Renou and Calle, 1939, preface). The Breton and Eluard collections auctioned in 1931 were given over to pre-Columbian art to almost as great an extent as to Oceanic objects. The 1936 exhibition of surrealist objects at the Charles Ratton Gallery included American objects along with those of Oceania; the catalogue specifies these American works as Eskimo, Peruvian, and pre-Columbian.

27. Metraux, "Rencontre avec les ethnologues."

to be experienced. “Mexico was not only the most streaming of the human slaughterhouses,” Bataille writes in comparing Aztec culture with that of the Incas, which he found bureaucratic and dour, “it was also a rich city, a veritable Venice of canals and bridges, of decorated temples and beautiful flower gardens over all.” It was a culture of blood that bred both flowers and flies.

If Giacometti had begun in 1926 and 1927 with a conception of primitive art inscribed on the Luquet side of the ledger, he had moved by 1930, the year “L’Amerique disparue” was published, to that of Bataille’s. For in the intervening years, Giacometti had been assimilated into the group that made up Documents.

In 1928, the year after he finished Spoon Woman, Giacometti showed his work for the first time. What he exhibited were two of the plaquelike heads and figures he had made that year, objects that carried the blank frontality of Spoon Woman to a new simplicity and elegance. In accordance with the direction implied in the aestheticized view of primitivism, preclassic objects now became his models for abstracting and reducing his form. The presence of these models within his practice was immediately apparent to the viewers of this work. In one of the earliest commentaries on Giacometti’s sculpture, Zervos spoke of its connection to Cycladic art.

On the basis of these two exhibited objects, Andre Masson asked to meet Giacometti. Immediately thereafter began the sculptor’s initiation into the group that included Masson, Desnos, Artaud, Queneau, Leiris, and Bataille, the group that was known as the dissident surrealists, for whom the intellectual center was Documents. Since three of the editors of Documents were Bataille, who was deeply committed to the development of ethnographic theory as that was being formulated at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in the seminars of Marcel Mauss, Michel Leiris, who had become an ethnologist by 1931, and Carl Einstein, who had published his study of primitive sculpture by 1915, the commitment of the magazine to this subject is obvious. Giacometti’s close and lasting friendship with Leiris, which began at this moment, brought with it a relation to the details and theories not only of ethnography but of the uses to which it was being put by the Documents group.

29. Ibid., p. 157.
31. For an account of the way Bataille’s thought was shaped by Mauss, see Meiraux, “Rencontre avec les ethnologues.” Another discussion of this relationship is James Clifford’s “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” Comparative Studies in Society and History, XXIII (October 1981), 543-564.
32. Hohl insists on Giacometti’s knowledge and employment of the kind of precise ethnographic information about the contexts of tribal art that would have come to him easily through his connection with Leiris (Hohl, 1972, p. 79.). In an interview with the author (February 24, 1983), Leiris supplied no detailed information but agreed that Giacometti was present at discussions concerning ethnography held by the Documents group.
Documents, Giacometti made Suspended Ball. A sculpture that was to cause a sensation among the orthodox surrealists, giving Giacometti instant access to Breton and Dali, a sculpture that set off the whole surrealist vogue for creating erotically charged objects, it was nonetheless a work that had much less to do with surrealism than it did with Bataille.33

Maurice Nadeau remembers the reactions originally triggered by Suspended Ball: "Everyone who saw this object functioning experienced a strong but indefinable sexual emotion relating to unconscious desires. This emotion was in no sense one of satisfaction, but one of disturbance, like that imparted by the irritating awareness of failure." An erotic machine, Suspended Ball is, then, like

33. Along with Miro and Arp, Giacometti exhibited in the autumn of 1930 at the Galerie Pierre. Georges Sadoul recalls, "At the end of 1930 I met Alberto Giacometti. He had just been admitted into the Surrealist group... In 1930 he introduced a new mode into Surrealism with his sculptures that were mobile objects. This launched the vogue of Surrealist objects with a symbolic or erotic function, the making of which became practically obligatory" (Cited in Hohl, 1972, p. 249). The date of Dali's "Objets a fonctionnement symbolique" (Le Surrealisme au service de la revolution, no. 3 [1931], 16-17), demonstrates this later attempt to absorb Giacometti's innovative work into the heart of the surrealist movement.

Duchamp's Large Glass, an apparatus for the disconnection of the sexes, the nonfulfillment of desire. But Suspended Ball is more explicitly sadistic than The Bride Stripped Bare. For the sliding action that visibly relates the sculpture's grooved sphere to its wedge-shaped partner suggests not only the act of caressing but that of cutting: recapitulating, for example, the stunning gesture from the opening of Chien Andalou, as a razor slices through an opened eye.35

In this double gesture incarnating love and violence simultaneously one can locate a fundamental ambiguity with regard to the sexual identity of the elements of Giacometti's sculpture. The wedge, acted upon by the ball, is in one reading its feminine partner, in another, distended and sharp, it is the phallic instrument of aggression against the ball's vulnerable roundness: it is not only the razor from Chien Andalou but the bull's horn from Bataille's L'Histoire de l'Oeil, which penetrates the matador, killing him by ripping out his eye.36

35. Bataille's article "L'Oeil," Documents, no. 4 (1929) — the same issue that carried the first essay on Giacometti's work (Michel Leiris, "Alberto Giacometti," 209-210) — opens with a discussion of this image and lists the various screenings of Chien Andalou as the places where the image had been reproduced. Not only does Bataille's concentration on the theme of the eye carry forward his own preoccupations from L'Histoire de l'Oeil, but through Marcel Griaule's article on the evil eye and its significance in primitive belief systems, published in this number as well, the link is once more forged between ethnographic analysis and modern thematic interests.

36. In his article "La peinture à l'œil d'Alberto Giacometti," Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne, no. 11 (1983), 64-100, Jean Clair argues for the direct connection between Bataille's eroticized, phallic conception of the eye, as found in both L'Histoire de l'Oeil and the Documents material, and Giacometti's sculpture Point to the Eye. His discussion of this work turns, in part, on Bataille's notion of vision objectified at the limiting condition of the exorbid eye.
And the wedge is possibly a third substitute for the phallus, joined in yet another way to the universe of sacred violence that had, by 1930, become the shared interest of Giacometti and Bataille. The wedge is shaped like the palmette stones of the ancient Mexican ballgame—wedge-shaped elements that were thought to have been worn for protection by the nearly naked participants in a game in which the ball could only be kept in play by being hit with the knees and buttocks and in which the very names used for the game stressed the instrumentality of the buttocks (for example, from Molina’s 1571 Nahua dictionary one finds, ollama: to play ball with the buttocks; and olli: certain gum of medicinal trees of which they make balls with which they play with their buttocks).³⁷ Like everything else in the Mexico Bataille admired, the Toltec ballgame was a combination of exuberance and cruelty, with accounts of bloody wounds caused by the ball and deaths of the players on the courts. With its use of the buttocks as a principle instrument of play, the game had a further homoerotic overtone. If, as I am suggesting, the Mexican ballgame was a component in the formation of Suspended Ball—opening as the work does onto Giacometti’s immediately subsequent investigation of sculpture itself as a ball court, or playing field, or gameboard, as in Point to the Eye, Circuit, and “On ne

³⁷. See Frans Blom, “The Maya Ball-Game Pok-Ta-Pok,” Middle American Researches, Tulane University, 1932. This essay published in the 1930s represents the level of ethnographic knowledge of the ballgame at the time we are here considering.
joue plus" (No More Play)—then a “third sex” must be added to the cycle of indeterminacy of the work’s sexual signifiers.

Giacometti’s early sculpture had already demonstrated an interest in pre-Columbian art, along with that of Africa and the Cyclades. Jacques Dupin, whose study was completed during the sculptor’s lifetime, reports that Giacometti’s early “exotic” sources were Africa, Oceania, and Mexico. Two works that bear obvious witness to this early Mexican connection are the Crouching Man of 1926 and a possibly even earlier plaster Head; and third sculpture, Hour of the Traces of 1930, permits a reading of more than an aesthetic relationship to Mexico but rather a Bataille-like experience of the ethos of Aztec culture. It is the imagery of "l’Amerique disparue" and the other reports of Aztec culture published in Documents—the full series of which Giacometti carefully guarded his entire lifetime—that provides a possible reading of Hour of the Traces as the ecstatic image of human sacrifice. For the figure at the top of the work, whose rictus is either that of extreme ecstasy or pain (or as Bataille would have it, both), appears posed on an altar below which swings the form of a disembodied heart.

39. Jacques Dupin told me that when he began work on his monograph on Giacometti, the sculptor lent him his own carefully protected, full set of Documents to work from. For one of the Documents articles on this subject, illustrated by codex representations of the victims and the places of sacrifice, see Roger Hervé, “Sacrifices humains du Centre-Amérique,” Documents, II, no. 4 (1930).  
40. Cahiers d’Art, no. 10 (1929), 456, reproduces a photograph of an Aztec pyramid topped by an altar whose structure is suggestive for that of l’Heure des traces.
Hour of the Traces immediately preceded Suspended Ball. The two sculptures are structurally connected by virtue of their shared play with a pendant element swung from a cagelike support. Within the universe of ideas associated at that moment to Aztec culture, the sculptures may be thematically connected as well. But without any doubt they are both assimilable to Giacometti’s fully elaborated accounts of his own thoughts of sadism and violence. Although first published in Breton’s magazine, a text like “Hier, sables mouvants,” with its fantasy of rape (“the whole forest rang with their cries and groans”) and slaughter, has little to do with the notions of convulsive beauty authorized by surrealism. Its relationship is to Georges Bataille, whose own writing and preoccupations seem to have given Giacometti permission to express these fantasies of brutality. Like his lifetime attachment to Bataille’s magazine, Giacometti’s writing about violence—as in his essay on Jacques Callot or his text “Le rêve, le Sphinx et la mort de T.”—continued well beyond the 1930s.

41 Alberto Giacometti, “Hier, sables mouvants,” Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution, no. 5 (1933).
and his repudiation of surrealism. In both their structure and imagery these texts often call Bataille to mind. He said before that \textit{alteration} functions as a Bataillian concept because of the primal contradiction that operates its relation to meaning, such that the signifier oscillates constantly between two poles. This same kind of oscillation of meaning (or the complexity involved the more accurate term might be \textit{migration}) is what is put into play by \textit{Suspended Ball}. For though the work is structured as a binary opposition, with the two sexes, male and female, juxtaposed and contrasted, the value of each of these terms does not remain fixed. Each element can be read as the symbol of either the masculine or feminine sex (and for the ball, in addition to an interpretation as testicles, there are the additional, possible semantic values of buttocks and eye, neither of these determined by gender). The identification of either form within any given reading of the work is possible only in opposition to its mate; and these readings circulate through a constantly shifting theater of relationships, cycling through the metaphoric statement of heterosexual connection into the domains of transgressive sexuality—masturbatory, homosexual, sadistic—and back again. The transgression contained in the sculpture's signifying gesture, we should note, sets it apart simultaneously from Breton's adamantine rejection of the sexually perverse, and the rather anodine, formal \textit{jeux d'esprit} of Picasso's transformations of the human body in the late '20s, with which \textit{Suspended Ball} is often compared. In its continual movement, its constant “alteration,” this play of meaning is thus the enactment in the symbolic realm of the literal motion of the work's pendular action.

Although the alter(n)ation of \textit{Suspended Ball} is constant, it is nonetheless regulated in a way that is entirely structured by the possibilities of metaphorical expansion of its two elements—wedge and sphere—and the oscillations of their sexual values. In this erotic play within a structurally closed system, the sculpture participates in the daemonic logic of Bataille's \textit{L'Historie de l'Oeil}. In Bataille's work, which as Roland Barthes points out is literally the story of an object—the eye—and what happens to it (and not to the novel's characters), a

\begin{footnotesize}

42. Alberto Giacometti, “A propos de Jacques Callot,” \textit{Labyrinthe}, no. 7 (April 15, 1945), 3. This essay relates the fascination with horror and destruction on the part of Callot, Goya, and Gericault: “For these artists there is a frenzied desire for destruction in every realm, up to that of human consciousness itself.” In a thought that is obviously close to Bataille, Giacometti concludes that in order to understand this one would have to speak, “on the one hand of the pleasure in destruction that one finds in children, of their cruelty... and on the other hand of the subject-matter of art.” “Le rêve, le Sphinx et la mort de T.,” \textit{Labyrinthe}, no. 22/23 (December 15, 1946), 12-13. Not only does the story of the spider, in the dream recounted in this text, recall Bataille's theme of the \textit{inconceivable}, but the description of T.'s head, rendered hideously objective by death, is pure Bataille. Because “an object, a little, measurable, insignificant box,” the head is seen as a rotating cadaver, “hideous debris to be thrown away,” into the mouth of which, to Giacometti's horror, a fly enters.

43. Hohl declares, for example, “It is certain that the club and sphere forms that Picasso elaborated in his \textit{Project for a Monument} informed the structure of \textit{Suspended Ball} (Hohl, 1972, p. 81).

\end{footnotesize}
condition of migration is established in which the object is, as it were, "declined" through various verbal states. As a globular element the eye is transformed through a series of metaphors by means of which, at any given point in the narrative, other globular objects are substituted for it: eggs, testicles, the sun. As an object containing fluid, the eye simultaneously gives rise to a secondary series related to the first: yolk, tears, urine, sperm. The two metaphoric series thus establish a system of combination by means of which terms can interact to produce a near infinity of images. The sun, metaphorized as eye and yolk, can be described as "flaccid luminosity," and can give rise to the phrase "the urinary liquefaction of the sky." Yet it is more correct to characterize the two metaphorical series as two chains of signifiers, "because for each one it is obvious that any term is never anything but the signifier of a neighboring term." And if, as one part of one chain connects to that of the other, this combinatoire is a machine for the production of images, it is essential to note that because of the logical constraints regulating the chains, there is nothing surrealist in these "encounters"; they are not meetings by chance.

The structure of these metaphor substitutions thus produces not only the course of the erotic action of the narrative, but the verbal fabric through which the recit is woven. And this aspect of l'Histoire de l'Oeil is also important to compare to the action of Suspended Ball. For, conceived as the action of metaphor, the story of the eye is not the story of a literal eye. Deprived of a point of origin in the real world, a moment that would be anterior to the metaphorical transformations, conferring on them both their point of departure and their sense, the story has no privileged term. As Barthes says of the work's structure, "the paradigm has no beginning anywhere." Because the eye's sexual identity remains perfectly ambiguous (a round phallicism), the narrative does not have a single sexual fantasy hidden within its depths that would provide its ultimate meaning. "We are left no other possibility than to reflect on a perfectly spherical metaphor within l'Histoire de l'Oeil: each of its terms is always the signifier of another term (and no term is ever a simple signified), without the relay ever being able to be halted." This round phallicism, this collapse of distinction between what is properly masculine and what is properly feminine, this obliteration of difference, is for logic what the perversions are for eroticism: it is transgressive. As Bataille explains in his "Dictionary entry" in Documents for the word informe, philosophy's task is to make sure that everything has its proper form, its defined boundaries, its limits. But certain words, and informe is one of them, have a contrary mission. Their task is to declassify, to strip away the "mathematical frockcoats" that philosophy drapes over everything. Because by opening onto formlessness,

45. Ibid., p. 773.
to the collapse of difference, informe "comes down to saying that the world is something like a spider or a piece of spit [crachat]." Informe denotes what alteration produces, the reduction of meaning or value, not by contradiction—which would be dialectical—but by putrefaction: the puncturing of the limits around the term, the reduction to the sameness of the cadaver—which is transgressive. Round phallicism is a destruction of meaning/being. This is not to say that the objects and images of Histoire de l'Oeil or Suspended Ball literally have no form by resembling spittle, but rather that the work they do is to collapse difference. They are machines for doing this.

Bataille's "Dictionary" was dedicated to revealing the jobs that words do. His magazine Documents, within which it was housed, also had a "job," and part of this was to use ethnographic data to transgress the neat boundaries of the art world with its categories based on form. This is the "hard" use of primitivism, as opposed to what I referred to as the "soft" or aestheticized view of it. It certainly cannot limit itself to borrowing this or that shape from the repertory of primitive objects the way even art-school students (particularly within the decorative arts) were being encouraged to do during the 1920s. Instead it uses the "primitive" in an expanded sense (although with close attention to ethnographic detail), to embed art in a network that, in its philosophical dimension, is violently anti-idealist and antihumanist. Bataille ends his article "Primitive Art" by invoking the modern art that he respects, art that "rather quickly presented a process of decomposition and destruction, which has been no less painful to most people than would have been the sight of the decomposition and destruction of a cadaver." Intellectual realism—Luquet's aestheticizing, cognitively constructive category, which itself owes much to the early defense of cubist painting—will no more address the conditions of this "rotting painting," Bataille insists, than it can address the whole of sculpture in general. When it comes Bataille's turn in Documents to think about Picasso's work, he does so under the rubric "Soleil Pourri."

Only through this expanded conception of the "job" that primitivism performed for the dissident surrealists can we think about the brilliance of a sculpture like Suspended Ball or adjudicate among the claims about the "source"

46. "Informe" was Bataille's entry in the "Dictionnaire" of Documents, I, no. 7 (1929).
47. For a discussion of Bataille's "Dictionary" within the context of the various avant-garde dictionaries, see Denis Hollier, La PriSe de la Concorde, pp. 59-65.
48. For example, a four-volume series of photographic reproductions was published specifically for the instruction of arts and design students under the title La dévotion primitive, Calvage Éditeur, Paris, 1922. The volumes were equally devoted to African, Oceanic, and pre-Columbian objects, both sculptures and textiles.
50. For example, Apollinaire insists in Les Peintres cubistes (Paris, 1913) that cubism "is not an art of imitation, but an art of conception." Or, in Léger's essay "Les Origines de la peinture et sa valeur représentative" (Monolaie, no. 8 [May 1913], 7), he concentrates on the difference between "visual realism" and a "realism of conception."
51. This appeared in the special issue on Picasso, Documents, II, no. 3 (1930).
of Invisible Object. For the elaborate network of the primitive that had been
developed by the early '30s tends to provide a sculpture like Invisible Object with
many interconnected references, thus supporting not only Hohl's assertions
about the work but Breton's and Leiris's as well, and opening onto still further
conditions that generated the work.

If we start with Leiris's report about the little Swiss girl, which in the con-
text of this moment of Giacometti's art is certainly the most questionable of
referents, we see that in fact it fits into the circumstances surrounding the
development of the work. Breton reports that the first stage of the head, the one
ultimately replaced by the mask from the flea market, was flat and undefined,
although the conception of the eyes as large wheels—the right one intact, the
left one broken—continued through the first and second versions. Just prior
to making Invisible Object, in 1934, Giacometti made a plaster that fits Breton's
description and was undoubtedly the sketch for the initial idea of the figure's
head. Where the final version is crystalline and defined, the plaster sketch is
llabby and almost formless, but what connects the two conceptions (beyond the
wheel-like eyes) is the condition of being a mask. For the plaster head is clearly

52. Breton, Documents 34, 20.
53. The year before making the plaster mask/sketch for Invisible Object, Giacometti executed
another "mask" in plaster: the deformed head of Flower in Danger (1933). This sculpture, with its
images of incipient decapitation of the flower/head, is like a little machine for the production of
the aspide. It is possible that a plaster head by Arp, published in the special issue on surrealism
in Vario (June 1929), contributed to the notion of the head as a mask in the process of decom-
position.
copied from one of the carnival masks photographed by Jacques-André Boiffard and reproduced in Documents to accompany Georges Limbour's text "Eschyle, le Carnaval et les Civilises."\(^54\)

The setting for Limbour's meditation on this subject is a chaotic general store in which the author watches a little girl shyly pick up a carnival mask of a bearded man and, trying it on, transform herself into a kind of Lolita by lasciviously running her tongue along the lips of the papier-mâché face. The vivid description of this "Salome of the streets" may well be the vehicle of association with the little Swiss girl.

The rest of Limbour's article also rewards attention. Speaking first of the conception of death into which the grimacing masks of Greek tragedy froze the mobility of the human face, Limbour then turns to primitive masks. For the Documents group as well as for the orthodox surrealists, the preferred domain of

\(^54\) Documents, II, no. 2 (1930), 97-102.
primitive art was no longer that of Africa (which was considered too rational, too formalist) but that of Oceania, and it is to this that Limbour refers. In a passage representative of the angrily anticolonialist feeling of both groups, Limbour castigates the violation of these territories by the white man, who substitutes his "missionaries of Lent, his paper-mache Jesuits" for the incredible force of the Melanesian conception of the mask. And in an image that is right out of Bataille's conception of the soleil pourri, he speaks of the faces carved onto the great poles stuck into the earth, "staring straight into the sun." Having raped the South Seas to send its sacred objects back to the art markets and

55. For example, the surrealist map of the world in 1929 places Oceania at the very center (Variétés, June 1929: Surrealism in 1929).
56. In 1931 Louis Aragon organized an anticolonialist exhibition in a meeting hall in the rue de la Grange-Butelière, to protest the official Exposition Coloniale. Giacometti's contribution consisted of political cartoon drawings. Two photographs of the room set up by Aragon, Eluard, and Tanguy for the exhibition La Verite sur les colonies appear in Le Surrealisme au service de la revolution, no. 4 (December 1931).
57. "Soleil pourri" concentrates on the Mithraic cult and the spasmodic practices incited by looking into the sun. This theme was elaborated in the series of texts entitled "L'oeil pineal."
Trocaderos of "civilization," the West has also developed its own masks, ones, Limbour writes, that are worthy of Aeschylus. These, of course, are the gas masks that alone are authentic to our times. "Because if religion, the cult of the dead, and the festivals of Dionysos turned the mask into a sacred, ritual ornament among the various ancient peoples, we too have our own religion, our own societal games, and consequently our own masks. Only the general standardization of our age requires that we all wear the same one."

The thought of the gas mask, which substitutes for the "humanity" of the face a horrific image of the brutality of industrialized war, had become extremely widespread among the 1920s avant-garde. A suite of photographs in Variétés showing wearers of gas masks and other kinds of mechanical devices displays this fascination for what modern imagination has dreamed to replace the head of man. As with all the mechanical candidates, but with extraordinary force in the case of the gas mask, this substitute calls to mind not higher stages in the evolution of the species but much, much lower ones. Because the wearer of the gas mask looks like nothing so much as an insect.

The man with the insect head is informe, altered. What should be the sign of his highest faculties, his mind, his spirit, has become lowly, like the crushed spider, or the earthworm. The man with the insect head is, like the deformed

anthropoids of the caves, acephale: a transgressive thought of the human. The term is, of course, Bataille's, and in his work it functioned as a kind of password by which to enter the conceptual theater where humanity displays the richness of its contradictory condition. For acephale opens onto the experience of man's verticality—his elevation in both its biological and moral significance—as a negation: a development toward the primitive, an ascendance downward. As we shall see, this conceptual inversion also played a structural role in the redefinition of sculpture that Giacometti explored in these years. But for Giacometti, as well as for many of his fellow artists, its most obvious impact was thematic.

Within the imaginative circuit of the period we are considering, the man with the insect head is also the woman with the insect head: the praying mantis. The symbol of a collapse of the distinction between life—or procreativity—and death, the praying mantis fascinated the vanguard of Variétés, Documents, and Minotaure on the basis of a single detail: the female of the species was known to

59. Bataille's concentration on the acephale led, in 1936, to the creation of a journal of that name for which Masson designed the cover. One of his early treatments of the representation of man in ancient culture as acephale was his text "Le has materialisme et la gnose," Documents, II, no. 1 (1930), 1-8. Leo Frobenius deals with this theme in "Bètes hommes ou dieux," Cahiers d'art, no. 10 (1929).
cat its partner after, or even during, copulation. Because of the strongly anthropomorphic character of this insect, its mating habits seemed extremely portentous to the surrealists. Roger Caillois's essay on the mantis, published in Minotaure in 1934, which became the basis of his later studies of the function of myth and the ambiguity of the sacred, reported that Breton, Eluard, and Dali all kept large collections of these insects, in cages.60

Caillois's essay released a swarm of praying mantises onto the surfaces of surrealist painting.61 But even before 1934 the insect had appeared in Giacometti's work as well as Ernst's. Giacometti's 1930 Woman, Head, Tree depicts the woman as a mantis and seems to have introduced the production of the two Cages of the following year. In both of these an abstracted image of the mantis is at work within the nightmarish confines of the sculpture, attacking its masculine partner emblematically represented by a simple sphere, or cranium.62 With these Cages, the mantis appears as well as to have been thought through the medium of extreme formal disjunction that was considered to be the major visual characteristic of Oceanic art, giving it its power and its savage poetry. One of the several mallanggan from New Ireland that could have been known to Giacometti at this time is extremely suggestive as a possible source for the idea of a disjoint, caged figure.63 And in the analysis of Melanesian motifs that Carl Einstein published in the 1920s, the mallanggan's structure, conceived as a cranium contained within a scaffolding of bones that is the primitive reconception of the skeleton, is even more suggestive for an iconological reading of the Cage.64

After this it was Ernst who took up the theme of the mantis and in his production of Une Semaine de Bonte, executed in 1933, one finds the image imbedded within a whole oeuvre dedicated to the conditions of the acephale.65 In one chapter of this collage novel in which the human (male) head is replaced by everything from worms to birds to lions, the actors are depicted with the heads of the great Easter Island statues, and juxtaposed to one such figure regarding (it)self in a mirror is a mantis in the act of consuming her mate.66

The rapport between Giacometti and Ernst during the early 1930s resulted in Ernst's visit to the Giacometti family's summer house at Maloja in 1934, where with Giacometti's help Ernst made a series of sculptures by slightly

60. Roger Caillois, "La mante religieuse," Minotaure, 1, no. 5 (May 1934), 25. See also, "La Nature et l'amour," Vassaris, II, no. 2 (June 1929).
62. Hohl traces the use of the sphere as the metonymic representation of the male, in the works of these years (Hohl, 1972, pp. 81-82).
63. This is D 62.2.10 of the Musee des Arts africains et Oceaniens, formerly in the collection of M. Girardin.
64. Carl Einstein, "Sculptures melanesiennes," L'Amour de l'art, no. 8 (1926), 256.
65. Ern's Femme 100 Tors (1929) was nominally dedicated to this theme even though it does not directly illustrate it
66. Une Semaine de Bonte, p. 168.

reworking and etching large stones that the two men dragged from the glacial moraine. The figures Ernst chose to represent on these sculptures were both the birds from the Easter Island cults and the Papuan bird from New Guinea, with which Ernst identified and which he used as his alter ego Loplop.\textsuperscript{67} Much of the sculpture that Ernst went on to make in the following years shows the effects of this visit on his art. His \textit{Lunar Asparagus} (1935), for example, is obviously indebted to \textit{Trois personnages dans un pr\'es}, a work resonant with primitive associations, which Giacometti had set up in 1930 in the Swiss countryside.\textsuperscript{68} But the interest obviously ran both ways as Giacometti's \textit{Project for a Passageway} (1930-31) indicates, with its closeness to images like Ernst's \textit{Anatomy of a Bird} or \textit{La Belle Jardiniere}.

Thus Ernst's association in \textit{La Semaine de Bonte} of the mantis with the context of Oceania and the site of the Papuan spirit bird provides yet one more aspect of the many factors that determined the conception of \textit{Invisible Object}, with its own inclusion of a bird's head reminiscent of Loplop's. It establishes a conceptual site within which to see how the logic of \textit{Invisible Object} works to combine the Solomon Islands spirit of the dead with the mythic/biological purveyor of death supplied by the form of the mantis. In Breton's story of the substitution of one version of the work's head by another, what we can now read as the constant factor is the idea of the head as a mask, and the figure, therefore, as acephale. As the mask itself becomes increasingly cruel of aspect, it more and more closely resembles the pointed shape of the mantis's face, with its huge staring eyes.\textsuperscript{69} Giacometti's attraction to the flea-market mask was indeed, as Freud would have said, overdetermined.

One wing of Giacometti scholarship is extremely focused on the psycho-biographical underpinnings of his art.\textsuperscript{70} To what has been said about the factors contributing to \textit{Invisible Object}, this interpretive strategy would undoubtedly add a hallucinatory maternal presence hovering behind the Solomon Islands spirit of the dead. Dressed in black, the woman whom Giacometti rapes and slaughters in his adolescent fantasies is the same woman who enters the \textit{Palace} at 4 a.m. to disrupt its erotic idyll. The great proscriber of his sexuality, she is

\textsuperscript{67} Although Ernst's extensive collection of Oceanic art contained other things as well, he largely specialized in objects of the Papuan Gulf (New Guinea), according to the research of Philippe Peltier. (See Peltier in \textit{Promission in 20th Century Art}, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984.)

\textsuperscript{68} Now destroyed, the work was published in \textit{Afrotastes}, no. 3/4 (1933), 40. There is an obvious resemblance between these stake-like personages driven directly into the ground and the tribal wooden posts totemically carved and set into the earth at the entrance to villages or houses, to protect a given area, that were widely known at this time.

\textsuperscript{69} Giacometti spoke of his attraction to Oceanic sculpture in terms of the exaggeration of the eyes: "New Hebrides sculpture is true, and more than true, because it has a gaze. It's not the imitation of an eye, it's purely and simply a gaze. All the rest is a prop for the gaze." Georges Charbonnier, \textit{Le monologue du peintre}, Paris, Rene Juilliard, 1959, p. 166.

\textsuperscript{70} This is true not only of Hohl's monograph, but also of the approach taken by Yves Bonnefoy, who is preparing a major study of the artist. See "Etudes compar\'ees de la Fonction poétique," \textit{Annales du Collège de France}, 1982, pp. 643-653.
Annette Stampa Giacometti. It is possible to trace the way this maternal force was simultaneously associated with the ideas of death that haunt his work and its equally strong focus on pregnancy and birth. Giacometti was obsessed with the idea of the rock that bears fruit, or, as Arp had written, "The stones are full of entrails. Bravo. Bravo." Interesting as that territory might be to explore, it lies at a tangent to the subject of this study, although in what follows, with its concern with death and the monument, the additional testimony of this personal, biographic motivation is certainly not unwelcome.

Any artist's work can be seen from the vantage of either of two, possibly conflicting, perspectives. One of these looks at the oeuvre from within the totality of the individual. The other regards it, far more impersonally, within a historical dimension, which is to say, comparatively, in relation to the work of others and the collective development of a given medium. Often these two perspectives overlap. The shape of Mondrian's career, for example, in its search for the neoplastic elements of painting, coincides with his position at the forefront of the general development of abstraction within twentieth-century art.

In Giacometti's case this is not so. For Giacometti's sculpture viewed from the perspective of his individual oeuvre is overwhelmingly that of the monument: the single, vertical figure, raised commemoratively in space, hieratic, immobile, tall. From the Spoon Woman, to Invisible Object, to any of the 1950s standing figures, we can follow the trajectory of this concern, using it to bestow a conceptual unity on Giacometti's art. But from the point of view of the history of sculpture—an impersonal and far less sympathetic measure—Giacometti's entire production of the vertical monument is less interesting, which is to say, less totally innovatory, than the work he made in the years from 1930 to 1933. For that intervening work is horizontal.

The formal innovation of those sculptures, almost wholly unprepared for by anything else in the history of the medium, was their ninety-degree turn of the axis of the monument to fold its vertical dimension onto the horizontality of the earth. In objects like Project for a Passageway, Head on Landscape, and the extraordinary gameboard sculptures like Circuit and "On ne joue plus," the work itself is simply and directly conceived of as a base. We could challenge the innovatory character of this invention by saying that already, in the teens, Brancusi had cancelled the distinction between sculpture and base, but we would then be missing the point of the profound originality of Giacometti's move. For Brancusi's base/sculptures remain vertical. They continue to house the object within the domain created by the primal opposition between what is not artistically determined—the ground—and what is—the sculpture. The very axis

72. This is the epigraph for the chapter of Une Semaine de Bonté that contains the Easter Island section. Giacometti's text, "Hier, sables immuants," begins with his account of the large rock into which he would crawl when he was a child, remaining there for hours.
of verticality declares the apartness of sculpture's representational field from the world of actuality, and this dimension is traditionally introduced by the uprightness of a pedestal, with its initiation of the lift of the work above the ground, its removal from the space of the real. Like a picture frame, the pedestal closes off the virtual field of representation from the actual space around it.

But if the picture is somehow only its frame, then this distinction is not so easy, and the representation begins to fuse with its literal surroundings. This was the transformation of the sculptural that Giacometti put in place between 1930 and 1933. For the rotation of the axis onto the horizontal plane was further specified by the contents of the work as the "lowering" of the object, thereby joining it simultaneously to the ground and to the real—to the actuality of space and the literalness of motion in realtime. From the perspective of the history of modern sculpture, this is the inaugural act of Giacometti's art, with implications for much of what was to take place in the rethinking of sculpture after World War II. And it is precisely within this theater of operations that we once again encounter Giacometti's relationship to tribal art and the primitive.

The earliest of these sculptures is Project for a Passageway (1930-31), an object both close to Ernst's "anatomies" and determined by the ethnographic metaphor of the body as a cluster of African clay huts. Giacometti's alternate name for this work—The Labyrinth—reinforces the relationship of its conception to the world of the primitive. For in the thinking of the early 1930s, with its obsession with the Minotaur, the labyrinth was set in primal opposition to classical architecture's connotations of lucidity and the domination of space. In the grip of the labyrinth, it is man who is dominated, disoriented, lost.

With the second of these horizontal sculptures the issue of rotation of the axis becomes more prespicuous. Head/Landscape (1930-31) was initially called...
Fall of a Body onto a Diagram, and it is this notion of the body’s fall that verbally acknowledges what the sculpture visually performs. The structural principle of Head/Landscape depends on the metaphorical relation between the two things operated through the spatial device of anamorphosis: rotated onto the horizontal plane, the face resembles a landscape. This precise relationship was spelled out in a display of “paranoid critical” thinking by Salvador Dali when he “read” a photograph of African natives sitting in front of their huts as a Picasso head, a (mis)reading that resulted, he explained, by his disorientation with regard to the photograph. In Dali’s presentation the image is then, like Head/Landscape, rotated ninety degrees. But Giacometti’s sculpture is less like a head in rotation than it is like a mask or flat covering of some sort. And the landscape that is its alternate reading does not seem like the neutral terrain of Dali’s example but rather resembles a necropolis, its rectangular openings suggesting a tomb. (This combination of tomb and necropole would be made more precise by the collins sunk into the ground of “On ne joue plus” of the following year.)

76. In Zervos’s “Quelques notes sur les sculptures de Giacometti,” (Cahiers d’art [1932], 337-342), the work, which bore the written inscription “la vie continue,” was published with the title Chute d’un corps sur un graphique. Later, in picturing his art of these years, Giacometti labeled this now-lost sculpture Paysage — Le couche. See “Lettre a Pierre Matisse,” Alberto Giacometti, New York, Pierre Matisse Gallery, 1948. Carola Giedion-Welcher, who knew Giacometti, published an Etruscan votive bronze from the museum in Piacenza as the possible inspiration for Project for a Square (in Giedion-Welcher, Contemporary Sculpture, New York, Wittenborn, 1960). Hohl suggests that this ancient object was more likely related to Chute d’un corps sur un graphique and is the source of this name, since the Etruscan work is covered with runes. Hohl, 1972, p. 299, fn. 29.

77. Salvador Dali; “Communication: visage paranouique,” Le Surréalisme au service de la résolution, no. 3 (December 1931), 40.

78. See Hohl, 1972, p. 82.
Various African masks, photographed and published lying down, may have played a role in suggesting the morphology of Head/Landscape. But the object that weaves together most of the threads of association suggested by the work's metaphorical play, and which for that reason could well have been a source, is the lid of a child's coffin from New Caledonia, in the Musée de l'Homme. This object figured in the copious illustrations of the 1929 Cahiers d'art special issue on Oceania, an issue that Giacometti possessed and from which he made many copy-drawings. Giacometti had constantly insisted that his frequent drawing after other works of art was most often done from illustrations rather than in front of the things themselves. The example of his pre-1945 drawings of Oceanic objects bears this out, for they are practically all taken from the same published source. This resource, at the time the largest easily accessible repertory of Oceanic images (containing, moreover, many representatives of the surrealist collections: Breton, Aragon, Tzara), may have suggested other types of relationship to Giacometti besides the head/landscape of the coffin lid (figure 122). The Easter Islands bird/fish of figure 180 could have operated behind the development of the phallically conceived Disagreeable Objects (1931), and the tusklike earring owned by Tzara, figure 169, is strongly related to the same series’ Disagreeable Object to Be Disposed Of.
Alberto Giacometti. Head/Landscape. 1930-31. Plaster, 9 1\(\frac{1}{2}\) by 27 1\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Whereabouts unknown.

ther, the bird/woman statue of figure 46 resembles one of the two personages that inhabit the necropolis of "On ne joue plus"; and as has been suggested above with regard to the object owned by Max Ernst, the various *mallanggan*, particularly the one belonging to Louis Aragon (figure 65), contain the idea of sculptural scaffolding that one finds in Giacometti's repeated use of the cage.

Given the almost exclusive identification of the surrealists with Oceania, the upsurge of these sources among the range of primitive images that were fueling his imagination at this time might be used to reinforce the general characterization of this period of Giacometti's work (1930–32) as his "surrealist epoch." However, Giacometti's connection to the orthodox surrealists did not really begin in 1930. *Suspended Ball*, the object that excited their attention, was not exhibited until the end of that year. It is not to the surrealist conceptual domain, to its fascination with the aleatory, with games of chance and the *objet trouvè*, that we should look for the matrix of ideas that operate Giacometti's conception of sculpture's rotated axis: the horizontal gameboard, movement in real time, the sculpture as base, the base as necropolis. The year this all began was 1930, and at that period Giacometti was still connected to *Documents*. The preoccupation with real time that enters his work with *Suspended Ball* and *Hour*
of the *Traces* opens onto a consideration of real space; and real space is defined by sculpture that has become nothing but its base, a vertical that is rotated into "baseness." This very operation was made continually by Bataille as he developed the concept of "basesse"—a low or base materialism—in *Documents.*

In the anatomical geography of Bataille's thought the vertical axis emblematizes man's pretensions toward the elevated, the spiritual, the ideal: his claim that the uprightness separating him biologically from the bestial distinguishes him ethically as well. Bataille, of course, does not believe this distinction, and insists on the presence—behind the repressive assumptions of verticality—of lowness as the real source of libidinal energy. Lowness here is both an axis and a direction, the horizontality of the mud of the real. If feet are highly charged objects, Bataille insists in "Le gros oeil," it is because, simultaneously the focus of disgust and eros, they are the part of the body that is mired in the ground. "A return to reality implies no new acceptance whatever, but it means that we are basely seduced, without symbolic substitutions and up to the point of crying out, in staring, eyes wide open: staring thus in front of a big toe."85

In the "Dictionary" entry *Bouche* this opposition between the vertical and horizontal axes is thought specifically through the operation of rotation. The mental axis is the one connecting eyes and mouth, issuing in language, the expressive function that heralds the human. The biological axis on the other hand connects mouth to anus—locating the alimentary functions of ingestion and excretion. To lower the mental, or spiritual, axis onto the biological one is to think about the real transformation of articulate sounds into bestial ones at the moments of man's greatest pain or pleasure, and to see these in their true operation as excretory. The summit of the body is thus given an opening that has nothing to do with the ideational, but is rather a hole resembling the anus. In *Documents* this text was illustrated by a full-page photograph by Boiffard of a mouth, wide open, wet with saliva.86

This idea of a hole at the top of man's head—one that functions to de-idealize, de-rationalize, dis-equilibrate—led Bataille to try to construct the mythoanatomical legend of the pineal eye. Bataille conceived of this gland at the summit of the human structure as a blind spot. The very opposite of Descartes' belief that the pineal eye was the organ connecting the soul to the body, Bataille's notion of the gland's function is that it propels man upward, attracting him toward the empyrion—representative of all that is lofty—impelling him however to stare straight into the sun, becoming as a result, crazed and

---

84. Bataille, "Le bas materialisme et la gnose."
85. "Le gros oeil," *Documents,* no. 6 (1929), 302.
86. In a 1926 drawing of a nude, Giacometti depicts this axial rotation by conflating the mouth and genitals. This relationship is the formal idea as well behind the female figure in *The Couple* of the same year, and is a common motif in African art.
Jacques-André Boiffard. Photograph. Published in Documents, II, no. 5 (1930).

Jacques-André Boiffard. Photograph. c. 1930.

Alberto Giacometti. Woman. 1926. Ink on paper, 7 by 5 inches.
blind.87 The obsession with the sun promoted by the pineal (blind) eye is, then, another instance of the collapse of the vertical into the horizontal, as man in his disorientation literally and symbolically loses his head.88 The image of the man with the hole at the top of his cranium—another form of the acephale—connects in this way to the experience of the labyrinth, the space of implosion, as the distinction is blurred between inside and outside, between beginning and end.

The blinding, crazing sun is the soleil pourri at which the Easter Island idols stare and to which Bataille consecrated his essay on Picasso's "rotting art." But then, for Bataille, the entire problematic of modern painting subtends his conception of the beginnings of art as the representation of sacrifice, the symbolic correlative of the mutilation of the human body. The space of this mutilation is initially the cave or grotto of the prehistoric painters, the first occupiers of the labyrinth. There art begins, but not with an act of self-duplication—as the relationship of painting's origins with the myth of Narcissus would have it.

87. The five texts on the pineal eye were written between 1927 and 1930. Never published, they are collected in the Œuvres Complètes, vol. II, pp. 13-50.
Painting is born with man's refusal to reproduce himself, and out of an act of self-mutilation.89

This set of connections between painting, a fascination with the sun, and the mutilation of the body in an act of sacrificial madness, is spelled out in Bataille's essay "La mutilation sacrificielle et l'oreille coupée de Vincent Van Gogh." For Bataille, Van Gogh's is not an aberrant gesture but is entirely representative of art's essential, archaic function. As one scholar of Bataille's work explains, "Self-mutilation demands to be thought of as an act, in fact, the pictorial act par excellence. Because painting is nothing if it doesn't strike at the architecture of the human body; this architecture which, precisely, is not simple because it implies self-mutilation."90 The Minotaur, not Narcissus, presides over the birth of an art in which representation represents alteration.

One after another, Giacometti's gameboard, horizontal sculptures enact the marriage of the field of representation with the condition of the base, the ground, the earth. This rotation of the axis into the dimension of the physical is the shift of direction of the acephale. But these rotated works share another aspect with the themes of the headless man and the labyrinth. For, with one exception, all of them carry the further signification of death. "On ne joue plus" conceives of the "sculpture" as a game, its board cratered with semicircular hollows modeled on the African pebble game i,91 but into its center are sunk two tiny coffins, their lids askew. The literal space of the board on which pieces can be moved in real time fuses with the image of the necropolis.

The Little Dictionary lists the sheet that covers an empty coffin as one of the primal meanings of representation. Representation, a stand-in for the dead, is thus conceptually suspended between the symbolic and the real decay of matter—the precise condition of alteration. Bataille's notion of a "base materialism" operates in this very middle ground between the literal and the symbolic, for it conceives the entire field of social relationships as wholly structured by the conditions of representation, which is to say, language. But language is thought of as a directionless maze in which, for example, the sacred is the function of the very conditions of the word itself: sacer, like altus, pointing in two directions, toward the blessed and the damned. Classical philosophy wishes to repress this

89. In "La mutilation sacrificielle et l'oreille coupée de Vincent Van Gogh," Documents, II, no. 8 (1930). Bataille attacks, for example, Languet's acceptance of the "folded-finger" hypothesis to explain the cave paintings in which stenciled hands are recorded with missing fingers (Oeuvres Completes, vol. 1, p. 267). A motif of great fascination, the stenciled hand is used in La Concorde (1930).
90. Hollier, La Prise de la Concorde, p. 148.
91. Hollier mentions wooden Benin gameboards that Giacometti might have seen at the Charles Ratton Gallery, which could have served as a model for this work (Hollier, 1972, p. 299, fn. 27). M. Ratton, however, says that no Benin objects of this type exist. Instead, one has only to turn to the wooden gameboards for i, which are still being produced today. The surfaces for this game were often improvised, hollowed out of the earth or in stone. Marcel Griaule's dissertation shows such a board in stone (Griaule, "Jeux Dogons," Paris, 1938, figure 95).
doubleness and reconstruct a language in which each element has a specific value, and only one. It wants to build vertical monuments to cover over the necropolis where meaning burrows into the dirt of decay, contamination, death. The space of this linguistic necropolis, in which language both forms and represents the real desires of the acephale, is the labyrinth.

The gameboard of "On ne joue plus" is not a readymade, its horizontality is not the unmodulated topple of the snowshovel of Duchamp's *In Advance of a Broken Arm*. The gameboard, with its little pieces, is a representation in which the symbolic is made a function of the base, the base in Bataille's sense (*baseuse*), a concept far from surrealist poetics, forged instead out of a vision of the primitive.

In 1935 Giacometti's art changed abruptly. He began to work from life, with models who posed in the studio, instead of making sculptures — as he later said of his work of the early 1930s— that "used to come to me complete in my mind."92 The break this precipitated with the surrealists left Giacometti violently hostile. He declared that "everything he had made up to that time had been masturbation and that he had no other goal but to render a human head."93 As part of this repudiation he is also reported to have denied his connection to


primitive art, saying that if he had taken anything from objects of this type it
was simply because *art negre* was modish during his early career.94

What Giacometti was rejecting was not simply surrealism or a related
connection to tribal art. At a deeper, structural level, he renounced the
horizontal and everything it meant: both a dimension within which to rethink
the formal concerns of sculpture, and a matrix through which human anatomy
was “altered.” From 1935 on, he devoted himself to vertical sculpture. Having
made this decision, he left behind those two concerns that had worked together
to generate the brilliance of his work of the early ’30s: the base and the primitive.

Paris, 1983

94. In the late 1930s Giacometti is reported to have said this to Greta Knutson, then the wife of
Tristan Tzara, for whom he sat for a portrait (as told to me by Knutson’s daughter-in-law,
Madame Tzara).

The game of *Dôgôm*. Mali. Published in