

Alberto Giacometti: Prehistory as Imagination

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Prehistory is referenced for the first time in Jacques Dupin's 1962 monograph on Alberto Giacometti when he writes that Giacometti was unable to remember childhood games but could remember a monolith that haunted his imagination. Another reference reoccurs when he speaks of the artist's mother Annetta as a "goddess-mother."¹ The artist, who maintained a close relationship with the author, never spoke with him about prehistory. Nor did it occur in conversations with Genet, even if he alludes to the "idea of modelling a statue and then of burying it," which the writer relates to a sort of cult of death, the origins of art, and of humanization.² But in the case both of Genet and Dupin, the primordial reference for Giacometti is Egypt (Osiris). There is, however, an oft-cited notation in a notebook dating from around 1946, "drawings of caves, caves, caves, caves. There and only there, the movement is successful. To see why, to discover its possibilities, yet doubt."³ And then there are the copies of prehistoric art, even if, honestly, they are not very numerous. What did Giacometti know about prehistoric art and how did he learn about it? But also, what can be said about Sartre, Newman, Genet and others like Leroi-Gourhan who crossed (weaved, tangled?) the threads between one art and another, from prehistory to Giacometti? In the end, what can we learn from Chris Marker and Giacometti's visit in the 1960s to the Museum of Natural History in Paris other than that the history of art is reborn after a catastrophe?

1 Jacques Dupin, *Alberto Giacometti* (Paris : Maeght, 1962), 73.

2 Jean Genet, *L'Atelier d' Alberto Giacometti*, Décines, Marc Barbezat L'Arbalète, 1958-63, n.p. cahier 4.

3 Alberto Giacometti, *Ecrits*, ed. by Michel Leiris and Jacques Dupin (Paris: Hermann, 1990), 188.

"A Quasi-scientific Realism"

It is difficult to imagine that the artist ever had an in-depth knowledge of prehistoric art.⁴ After the discovery of Lascaux just after the second world war, numerous artists and intellectuals, most notably Georges Bataille, became passionate about prehistoric art. To visit a cave was to visit the workshop of a revered master, an obligatory step and almost propitiatory rite.⁵ The writer and doctor Theodore Fraenkel, André Breton's friend, who collected Giacometti's works, once took a photograph of Alberto and Annette Giacometti at the entry of a cave with paintings.⁶ Annette Giacometti's annotation on the back of the picture reads: "Next to the Lascaux caves, in the 1950s with Fraenkel and Marianne Strauss. In Dordogne. Photo from Fraenkel." Did he go to verify the intuition cited in my introduction, that "there and only there the movement was successful"? Ten years later, in 1956, he would again speak to his Japanese model Isaku Yanaihara of his admiration for the art on the cave walls. "There is there a quasi-scientific realism. It is so fresh that we might believe it was just drawn the day before. When you exit the cave after having seen those images of cows and bulls, you are surprised to find them in real life, right there, just as they were in the picture."⁷ All of which is to say that the artist does not hesitate to link prehistoric art and modern art. He thus also says to Yanaihara regarding Tal Coat: "his paintings remind me of Prehistory's rupestrian paintings."⁸

Books on prehistory in the artist's library attest to a growing interest after the war. It is extremely probable that the oldest book, on which he drew for photographic reproductions of a bison and the Venus of Laussel, *L'Humanité primitive dans*

4 Even though, as a reader of Cahiers d'Art, Giacometti had been able to read several articles devoted to prehistory after 1926, and even if I continue to defend the hypothesis put forward in my thesis that he was able to draw an aesthetic conclusion from the cupula stones that abounded near Stampa, and that something had happened in his work with the deepening of the „plaques“, „cycladic“ flat heads from the late 1930s. See my book *Alberto Giacometti. Les dimensions de la réalité* (Geneva : Skira, 1994), 72. Elke Seibert has made the plausible argument that Giacometti knew of Val Camonica and its prehistoric engravings, and especially that its relationship with prehistoric art, and with the landscape (that is, the „place“) had echoes in Giacometti's work. See her contribution in this volume: "Alberto Giacometti. Prehistoric Art as an Impulse for the Artist's Late Sculptural Work after 1939."

5 Rémi Labrusse has shown that the „in situ experimentation of parietal art, when it took place, did not occur until after, sometimes well after, first acts of allegiance to prehistory“ by modern artists. See "Préhistoire: une poétique de l'indistinction", in *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, "Préhistoire/Moderne", Winter 2013/2014, 44-57.

6 *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, exh. cat. MNAM- Centre Pompidou, Fondation Alberto and Annette Giacometti, ed. by Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2007, 51, ill. n°34. The inscription reads "Annette et Alberto Giacometti, Marianne Strauss ? à la grotte de Lascaux, vers 1950, Théodore Fraenkel, tirage argentique sur papier". What is seen, however, is Font-de-Gaume, near Eyzies.

7 Isaku Yanaihara, *Dialogues avec Giacometti*, translated by Véronique Perrin (Paris : Allia, 2015), 65. From March 21, 1956 (journal pages).

8 Ibid.

1 Alberto Giacometti, *Vénus de Laussel* after the reproduction in *L'Humanité primitive dans la région des Eyzies* (1924) by Louis Capitan and D. Peyrony, Paris, Librairie Stock, drawing, not dated



2 Alberto Giacometti, *Bison*, after the reproduction in *L'Humanité primitive dans la région des Eyzies* (1924) by Louis Capitan and D. Peyrony, Paris, Librairie Stock, drawing, not dated



la région des Eyzies (1924) by Louis Capitan and D. Peyrony,⁹ Paris, Librairie Stock, was acquired when he visited the caves of Lascaux. Giacometti also possessed Annette Laming-Emperaire, *Peintures, gravures et sculptures rupestres*, Editions Braun et Cie, Paris, 1951. He was of course interested in the excitement of the exhibition “40000 années d’art moderne” (1953) and other exhibitions of prehistoric art whose catalogs he owned: Christian Zervos, *Prähistorische Bronzen aus Sardinien*, Kunsthaus Zurich, 1954 and *Peintures préhistoriques du Sahara, Mission H. Lhote au Tassili* (Exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts, Marsan Pavillon, Louvre, November 1957–January 1958). In the end, if he had general works like Marc Rodolphe Sauter, *Préhistoire*, Editions des Deux mondes, Paris, 1956, his interest in alpine prehistoric art is also attested by the books of Emmanuel Anati, *La civilisation du Val Camonica*, Arthaud, Paris, 1960 or even Pellegrino Gaudo Sestieri, *La ville, la nécropole préhistorique dans la région de Gauda*, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Rome, 1964.

Up through 1953, Giacometti’s style is characterized by slim figures of men and women, silhouettes as fine as if they were performing an action, an act, like *L’homme au doigt* (1947) or *Femme marchant entre deux maisons* (1950), more expressionist fragments that seem to be practically resurgences from his surrealist period like *Le Nez* (1947), *La Main* or even *Tête sur tige*, all of the animals also skeletal. We might imagine the artist marked by the war and what he knew of the concentration camps—he did not dismiss them, but emphasized that the lengthening process was first and foremost genetic, the result of a formally endogenous quest, that is won by the “miserabilism” that made a moment the formula/recipe around Francis Gruber or Bernard Buffet. Nevertheless, the urban space, that is its field, seems to be distant in Giacometti’s art, in order to produce natural landscapes reminiscent of childhood and open to the double image, since they are anthropomorphized: see *Forêt or Clairière*, both from 1950.

But around 1952–53, there was an explosion of powerful examples: *Femme debout* (around 1953–54. AGD 316¹⁰), *Nu debout sur socle cubique* (1953, AGD 1816). This comes via the feminine figures, but extends to the masculine figures like those of Diego in the sweater, in the raincoat, with thick ensembles where the head is isolated and fraying on the knife blade. The feminine incarnations become excessive: Giacometti speaks of *Petit Monstre sacré* and *Petit Monstre II* (1953, AGD 543).

We could make the hypothesis that his visit to the caves of Lascaux and his interest in the art in the Eyzies region are interrelated. The drawings in Capitan’s book attest to this fact.

The *Vénus de Laussel* copied by the artist in Capitan’s book seems the archetype of *Femmes nues, debout* from 1953. Dating from around 25,000 BC, it was discovered in 1911 by the psychiatrist Cécile Lalanne at the archaeological site of Laussel, in the town of Marquay (Dordogne) in the Eyzies region.¹¹ Today it is conserved in the Aquis-

⁹ Louis Capitan and D. Peyrony, *L’Humanité primitive dans la région des Eyzies* (Paris : Librairie Stock, 1924).

¹⁰ I have added the references from the catalogue raisonné which the Giacometti Foundation has published online.

¹¹ J.-G. Lalanne and Jean Bouyssonie, « Le gisement paléolithique de Laussel. Fouilles du Dr Lalanne »,



3 Alberto Giacometti, *Nu debout sur socle cubique*, 1953, bronze, 43.2 x 11.4 x 10.5 cm, Fondation Giacometti

taine Museum in Bordeaux. Fairly large (54 x 36 cm), like all the Palaeolithic Venuses it has a conventional anatomy where the hips, breasts, buttocks, and vulva are very exaggerated while the feet and face are absent. From the front view, it holds a bison horn in its right hand.¹² If the action of brandishing a horn could seem a “successful movement” to Giacometti, it shows all the same that the robust build inspired him, with its highly sexualized appearance of a fertility goddess. The shortened legs also give the impression of an overhead view. The American drawing *Nu debout sur socle cubique* seems to operate in the same way by putting the emphasis on the female chest: after all, isn’t that what the modern sex idols the Hollywood actresses do? Like the sculpture, the camera makes the choice between his large drawings. *Petit Monstre sacré* seemingly concentrates its sensual charge at a measured height.

The bison’s elongated head could only have pleased Giacometti, as the necks of his own animals, especially horses, are similarly drawn out. The bison seems to have interested the artist for two reasons: the first is the movement of the head, the animal that turns, the second and resulting reason is that the head then appears to be inscribed on the rest of the animal’s body, and that suddenly, its contours make it exist as an ensemble without a head. In his contemporaneous work, instead of the acephalic body theorized by Bataille, the artist seemed to look for the shape of a head without a body, as in the 1947 works *Le Nez or Tête sur tige*. For him, the problem quickly became the coexistence of an expressive, individualized head, and a shapeless ensemble serving as a background. In all likelihood, that is why the Les Eyzies bison struck Giacometti: the juxtaposition of an attentive head and a large body at a standstill, a momentarily petrified ensemble. One hovering over the other, in short: it is simultaneously the thing participating in the ensemble and the eye distinguished from it. In a way it is the very antithesis of Auguste Bartholdi’s *Lion of Belfort*.

We do not know if Giacometti saw the influential 1953 exhibition “40 000 ans d’art moderne.” In any case, the catalog was not in his library. He certainly spoke about prehistoric art with Bataille, whose *Histoire des rats (Journal de Dianus)* (Paris, Midnight, 1947) he illustrated. In the same year he also made the bust of the woman Diane (*Buste de femme*). In 1952, the writer visited Lascaux for the first time and began his book *Lascaux, la naissance de l’art*,¹³ which was published in 1955. At the same time, in reference to *Femmes, debout* (1952–53), Giacometti commented that it reminded him of Marlene Dietrich or Marilyn Monroe (*Femme IV, Marilyn*), a movie star or „sacred monster.“ The prehistoric cave likewise became a movie theater and a projection surface. The artist covered his tracks, exalting the prostitute as a goddess-mother („naked in front of me, I see a goddess“) and kitsch as high art. Around 1954, Genet begins to pose in the workshop on the „uncomfortable kitchen stool,“ taking the notes that became *L’Atelier d’Alberto Giacometti*. He says to him that „his ideal would be the

L’Anthropologie, 1941–46, t. 50, 1–163.

12 According to Waldemar Deonna’s 1913 hypothesis, it could represent a horn of plenty.

13 Georges Bataille, *Lascaux. La naissance de l’art* (Geneva : Skira, 1955). See Daniel Fabre’s illustrated book, *Bataille à Lascaux* (Paris : L’Echoppe), 20, p. 31.

small rubber statue fetish that is sold to the South Americans in the hall of Folies-Bergères.“ But Genet does not believe him: he sees Giacometti’s sculptures as the latter sees the naked women in the studio, as goddesses. In these thick heads, the writer felt „a little ensemble of life, hard as a pebble.“ Elsewhere, he speaks of „a head in the form of a knife blade.“¹⁴

In 1954, however, these exaggerated feminine complexions fade. The standing *Annettes* are thin once again. With *Femmes de Venise* (1956), there is a balance between the stretched stature of the women and their broad pelvises. On the other hand, the series of bust-mountains with reduced or flattened heads or flattened in knife blade, in the case of the men, are not interrupted.

Thus, for Giacometti, the prehistoric is more than mere primitivism. There is no particular tension between, on the one hand, a highly sexualized expressionism where woman is a „sacred monster,“ the cinema hall is equated with the adorned cave, and man is a mountain of a head which is sharpened and immaterial from the front and isolated in a void from the side, and, on the other, a higher form of realism where the „movement is successful.“ „Caves, caves, caves ...“

Giacometti, a “prehistoric artist” according to many

After the discovery of Lascaux, each artist is potentially the „prehistoric artist“ of a writer or of an art critic. When Sartre speaks of Giacometti and „his contemporary, the man from Eyziès,“¹⁵ it is rather like Malraux lumping Picasso together with „Petit Bonhomme des Cyclades.“¹⁶ Any modern artist is necessarily like the „first man“ who, according to Newman, was most certainly an „artist.“¹⁷

Except that it is uncertain just what kind of „prehistoric artist“ Giacometti is. Or what the conception of art’s origin his work could refer to, related to a notion, even vague, especially vague, of prehistory. Or even what prehistory of a future art whose work would constitute prodromes.

For some, Giacometti is the „prehistoric“ artist of the immaterial, of the idea that precedes and exceeds matter, the man who obliterates, undoes, erases, and elides.

Sartre lays the groundwork in his essay „La recherche de l’Absolu“ (The Search for the Absolute“), which appears in the catalog of the 1948 Alberto Giacometti exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York:¹⁸ „There is no need to stare into Giacometti’s antediluvian face to surmise his pride or his desire to be at the beginning of the world.“ The philosopher also idealizes Giacometti’s figures: „as soon as I see them,

14 Cf. Jean Genet, *L’Atelier d’ Alberto Giacometti*, n.p.

15 Jean-Paul Sartre, « Giacometti. The Search of the Absolute », in *Alberto Giacometti*, exh. cat. New York, Pierre Matisse Gallery, 1948.

16 André Malraux, *La Tête d’obsidienne* (Paris : Gallimard, 1974), 272.

17 Barnett Newman, “The First Man Was an Artist”, *Tiger’s Eye* (1947), ed. John Philip O’Neill, Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews* (University of California Press 1992), 156.

18 See Michael Brenson, « La réception critique de Giacometti aux Etats-Unis, 1934-1965 », *L’Atelier d’Alberto Giacometti*, op.cit., 309-329.



4 Alberto Giacometti, *Petit monstre II*, 1953, plaster, 10 x 3.6 x 3.3 cm, Kunsthaus Zurich, Alberto Giacometti-Stiftung, gift of Bruno und Odette Giacometti, 2006



5 Alberto Giacometti, *Boule suspendue*, plaster/mixed media, 1930, Kunstmuseum Basel, Depositum Alberto Giacometti Foundation, 1965

I know them. They arise suddenly in my visual field as an idea does in my mind.“ For his part, Genet claims that Giacometti evokes nostalgia for what man might have been had he not first become *homo faber*: „So we nostalgically dream of a universe where man, instead of acting on the visible appearance, had worked to rid himself of it, not only in order to refuse any corresponding action, but to reveal enough of himself to discover this secret place, in ourselves, for what would have been possible a very different human adventure.“¹⁹ Newman says that it is an art of nothing, emerging from nothingness. He also holds that Giacometti is the artist opposed to *homo faber*. Newman is among those for whom the art of sculpture did not come from pottery, the diversion of a manufacturing technique towards the useless, but rather that art came first and practical applications followed thereafter.

On the other hand, the anthropologist Leroi-Gourhan gestures at Giacometti in a diametrically opposed way in „Memory and rhythms,“ the second volume of his 1965 book *Le geste et la parole*.²⁰ Having considered bifaces and pottery he writes: „Sphericity, symmetry, flatness, and curved surfaces are all rational in function and seductive beyond function. This aesthetic ambiguity is put to good use in certain contemporary works of art, such as the machines of Giacometti or Tinguely, mechanical assemblages with no rational function.“ „Giacometti’s Machines“ is an astonishing expression, but in the end it is possible to consider that the „objects of symbolic operation“ from the 1930s, to which the anthropologist certainly refers, are in a sense „machines“ without a motor, possessing pivots, suspensions, wire, sometimes a crank: *Boule suspendue* (1930), *Pointe à l’oeil* (1931), *Circuit* (1931), *Main prise au doigt*. As Dali clearly understood, the effectiveness of the „symbolic functioning“ of Giacometti’s „mobile and dumb objects“ is due to their minimal real movement, or at least potential movement, since no one dares to truly touch them, especially if the artist takes care to place the device within a „cage,“ which is immediately perceived as a trap. The ability to move the objects and their virtual motion tempts the viewer, catching him in the act of providing intentions to the device’s elements. The latter works as a test. These are tools that „seduce“ beyond their mere function.

The anthropologist tends to make Giacometti and Tinguely testers which open an aesthetic function beyond utility, rationality, and the effective beauty of the forms. *Homo faber* becomes „ambiguous“ regarding the purpose of what he creates: it would be better to refer to *Homo ludens*. By appealing to both artists, Leroi-Gourhan calls for a new primitivism in order to escape the dead end in which he finds the art of his time. His observation is that „the loss of manual discovery, the personal encounter of man and matter at the craft level has cut one of the issues of individual aesthetic innovation,“²¹ He worries about seeing „the very refusal of the rhythm in the white or blue table, or the refusal of the hand in the musket painting:“²² this is to be understood

19 Jean Genet, op. cit. cahier 2.

20 André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole, La mémoire et les rythmes* (Paris : Albin Michel, 1965), 134.

21 Ibid., 223.

22 Ibid. 254.

as a criticism of some of the main figures in contemporary art: the monochrome of Yves Klein or the „boulettisme“ of Salvador Dali and Georges Mathieu (and Niki de Saint-Phalle). However, the artists, in the first rank of which he placed Giacometti and Tinguely, are „at the point where the close predecessors of Lascaux painters were“²³ and placing at the heart of their artistic practice the „game of natural forces,“ in working with matter, gesture, fire, water, and earth, they conduct a „real dive into the infra-sapiens structures“ at the intersection of chance and psycho-physiology.“ Leroi-Gourhan therefore evokes an encounter between future art and original art beyond artistic conventions.

In any case, whoever returns to sculpture from the 1950s and 1960s with Leroi-Gourhan's eyes might discover a different prehistory. Within cave workshops, those earthen sheds strewn with metal carcasses and marked with footprints and sharp tools, artists attempt to bring forms to life. The torch which illuminated the parietal paintings preceded the electric arc and the projector. Deflectors walk along the glimmers and put the shadows in order. But this time, it is in three dimensions that the history of art begins again.²⁴ It is no longer the era when Lazslo Moholy-Nagy was proud of the round shapes silhouetted in shadows that he had leap across the walls of the room where he had installed his *Modulateur Espace-lumière* (1923–30). Even more than the machine itself, Tinguely's meta-matics are effective because they render well, but their shapes and gestures are truly beautiful. Like Moholy-Nagy's, the artist's previously transitive gaze settled on his creatures, to which he gave names or at least numbers. Individualized, they became quasi-humans whose assistants take care of them and run laps in their honor.

Covered with plaster and given over to constantly repeating figures on their iron frames in his workshop at 45 rue Hippolyte-Maindron, Giacometti no longer remembers the „mute and mobile objects“ that he had shaped in plaster some 25 years earlier before having a carpenter make them like tools or furniture. And yet their mobility never ceased to haunt him, as proof of a life of things that only manifests itself in works of art. It was this life of things which he still instilled in *Le Nez* of 1947, before giving life to figures in a different way, via an optical illusion where the void is the motor, something Rudolf Wittkower considered the cancer of sculpture.²⁵

However the Giacometti that Leroi-Gourhan imagined, the artist of irrational assemblages that can still be seen in *Le Nez* or *Chariot* (1950), the Giacometti *Homo faber*, is no more legitimate than Genet's „secret place“ Giacometti. Genet remembers the monoliths that inspired his early works, the flat heads or „plaques“ that recall the

²³ Ibid, 256.

²⁴ For his part, in « The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture » (1947) Clement Greenberg sees a promising prehistory in the miserable New York workshops of abstract expressionist painters “as isolated in the United States as if they lived in paleolithic Europe” in John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986-1993), vol. 2, 169.

²⁵ Rudolf Wittkower, *Qu'est-ce que la sculpture? Principes et procédures, de l'Antiquité au XX^e siècle* (1977) (Paris: Macula, 1995), 302.



6 Alberto Giacometti,
Figure dans un jardin, Figure
en pierre dans le jardin de
la villa Noailles à Hyères,
1931, Archives Fondation
Giacometti (no. 2003-0684),
Fontainebleau

7 Alberto Giacometti with his sculpture « Figure » in a garden, Alberto Giacometti posant devant la Figure en pierre dans le jardin de la villa Noailles à Hyères, 1932, Archives Fondation Giacometti, Paris (no. 2003-0685), Fontainebleau



prehistoric stelae that can be seen at the Fenaille museum of Rodez or the small museum of Pontremoli (Italy)²⁶ or the stone *Figure* (1931–32) for the Garden of Noailles at the Château-Bernard of Hyères (today in Fontainebleau), all of which were directly derived from three rough-hewn monoliths that he raised in the mountains of Maloja with Max Ernst in the summer of 1931.

The protagonists' connections between Giacometti and prehistoric art naturally reveal more about their own debates, and especially their conceptions of the origins of art, than about Giacometti himself! The artist himself produced an astonishing text at the end of his life, which articulates the impossibility of writing and prehistory (which itself preceded writing). It is impossible not so much for his art as for his animal forms, his reconstituted skeletons, and his fossils, all of which call into question his ability to remember each copy of his past works. Giacometti struggles to remember, on the one hand, a drawn inventory of Paris for the *Paris sans fin* ordered by Tériade, and, on the other hand, he constitutes art and prehistory in immemorial categories. This is at the very moment that Marker was filming *La Jetée* (1962).

The Immemorial or Prehistory as Immaterial

Leroi-Gourhan linked Giacometti and Tinguely: from homo faber to *homo ludens*. There is a part in Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) where they visit the Museum of Natural

²⁶ My dissertation *Art et Réalité. Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) ou le monumental à rebours* (Paris I, 1993), tome III, ill. and annexes, p. 46, ill. no. 177. Prehistoric steles, Musée de Pontremoli. We can compare them with those studied in Sardinia by Zervos. See Christian Zervos, *Prähistorische Bronzen aus Sardinien*, Kunsthhaus Zurich, 1954, a copy of which Giacometti owned.

History, similar to a visit Giacometti made in 1963 and which he related in the May 1964 text *Paris sans fin*.²⁷ Searching in Giacometti's notebooks for what he says about Orly where *La Jetée* begins and ends, we see he refers to the airport as a „non-place“ (Marc Augé) or rather as „a meanwhile.“ Here we have *homo viator*, he who exists in temporal transition, the immemorial man.

Giacometti describes how „one evening in November 1963 in the deserted paths of the Jardin des Plantes, the entire landscape had already gone dark. With fatigue and regret he shuffles towards the exit, full of failure, the large windows reflecting back the last light of day striped by the building's black bars, still disoriented, lost in despair in the hall of nameless snakes.“ He goes on: “ I do not know if I am old or young, I may have still a few hundred thousand years to live until my death, my past is lost in a gray abyss, I was a snake and I see myself as a crocodile with the mouth open. I was the crocodile crawling around with an open mouth.“

Disorientation in time (see each other again in the past, in the labyrinth of time as in his other text *Le Sphinx, le Rêve et la mort de T.* published in 1946²⁸), related to a trip, a surgical operation (the gastroscopy he has just undergone), the confrontation with death and the vestiges of the past, is common to the Giacometti released from the Remy de Gourmont clinic at Buttes-Chaumont, when he thinks of all those places in Paris that he draws with lithographic pencil and which made up *Paris sans fin*, and to the hero of *La Jetée* by Marker. Both can be seen in the Jardin des Plantes, under the large windows of the Galerie de l'Évolution, with the dinosaurs, the big cats, and the prehistoric birds. Both experience this temporal resettlement as the result of an operation performed on the body. Marker's hero is paired, blinded behind a mask (perhaps foreshadowing a virtual reality helmet); a substance is injected under his skin so that he moves in time; Giacometti associates the memory of his gastroscopy with the cold metal pipe that was thrust into his stomach and his visit to the Museum of Natural History on a winter evening: a vertiginous regression in time and scale. This brings him back to a saurian animality that makes him a „crawling crocodile“ (memory of the „room with nameless serpents“: the gallery of evolution and its dinosaurs). No doubt he vaguely felt that his own body had become a cave where the light had descended through the pipe so that the eye of the doctor could see walls and reliefs.

Prehistory has become decoupled from its reality and from its traces in order to form a continent where imagination and language are all-powerful.

In Marker's „photo-novel“ (as he called it),²⁹ the episode in the Museum of Natural History where the hero of the future meets the woman on the Orly pier represents the passage from one era to another: „Towards the 50th day, they meet in a museum full of eternal beasts / Now the shot is perfectly adjusted: projected on the chosen moment, it can remain there or move without difficulty / It too seems domesticated ... „ Glass roofs, shop windows, the point of view is sometimes on them both seized by

27 Alberto Giacometti, *Paris sans fin*, Paris, Tériade, 1969.

28 Alberto Giacometti, “Le Sphinx, le Rêve et la mort de T.”, *Labyrinthe*, 1946.

29 Chris Marker, *La Jetée*, 1962, 28 min.

8 Alberto Giacometti, *Paris sans fin*, Tériade (planche 81), 1969, Collections Kunsthaus Zurich



9 Alberto Giacometti, *Paris sans fin*, Tériade (planche 82), 1969, Collections Kunsthaus Zurich

the photographer, sometimes on her seen by him, for example when she points with her finger at something in a shop window: he looks at her with a certain distance that depicts the temporality both separating and uniting them, „as if space had taken the place of time,“ as Giacometti wrote in a different context (in his „Notes on copies“, of which we will speak in a moment³⁰), sometimes the point of view naturalized the animals themselves (the photograph is taken from the window). Soon, one slides to the idea that the last point of view, the zenithal vision through the summit canopy on them below, which raises the head to contemplate the large hanging birds, is a point of view of the future on the past time. It is then that a new episode opens in the scenario: the one where man, against his will, will be projected into the future.

For Marker, it was not the first time that one of his films addressed prehistory. He had given a humorous treatment of the „mammoth hunt“ in *Lettre de Sibérie* (1957), thanks to small cartoon sequences featuring palaeoanthropologists and frozen mammal remains. As if in fact, it was animation (pictures in motion) that best captured prehistoric art. In Giacometti's sentence quoted here again: „drawings of caves, caves, caves, caves. There and only there is the movement successful.“ The quadruple repetition of the word „cave“ with its somber tone gives an oral cadence rhythm like an echo evoking a nursery rhyme, as the mammoths proceed by.

It is the great temporal gap which gives rise to the blurring of epochs and the transparent simultaneity of the most diverse moments and places. In a sort of techno-romanticism *avant la lettre*, it is the pier of Orly, more contemporary in terms of Parisian industrial architecture, which summons images of a very distant past. The pier is an antonym of the museum: the first propels towards the future, the sky; the second leads back to the past and a field of ruins. The ultra-modern workshops are the inverted symmetrical halls of the museum's large glass ceilings. Unless they perform the same function as airports, but where we would be departing either towards the past or towards the future, where we would be sent either via space or via time.

Around 1960, Giacometti returned from a stay in Rome via Orly. In his notebook he writes: „The day of my return to Orly with Diego, lunch on the airport terrace. An immense landscape all around, roads, buildings, trees on the horizon, airplanes everywhere, people in the restaurant on the terrace, the immense sky with big clouds as in Dutch landscapes, I remember all this more than my entire week in Rome.“³¹

In October 1965, Giacometti returned from New York, the only trip he made by boat. In „Notes sur les copies,“ he remembers having „seen, two days ago, the far tip of New York dissolve and disappear on the horizon. It was thin, fragile, and ephemeral. It was as if I had lived the beginning and the end of the world, a dread squeezing around my chest...“ Seemingly lost in the ocean around him as he writes about his habit of copying, Giacometti feels unable to distinguish periods, to draw a chronology of his own copies but also of the original works of art: „works of art that day after day

³⁰ Alberto Giacometti, „Notes sur les copies“ (*L'Éphémère*, no. 1, 1966, 104-106), Paris, Hermann/ Fondation Giacometti, 2016.

³¹ Alberto Giacometti, *Ecrits*, op.cit., 217.

are disintegrating, fading, decaying, many of which (including those I prefer most) were already buried, sunk down under the sand, earth and stones, all following the same path."³²

According to Newman, a great admirer of Giacometti, it was in the plasmic era (1940) that art entered the mid-twentieth century,³³ substituting the forms apprehended from outside with objective data, interior apperception, and the fusion of subject and object in lived experience. If some of Giacometti's works from the years 1920–30 stand out, if one adopts this point of view, of plastic, then forms created by *homo faber*, mobile and shifting, polished shapes, carved in wood or marble, grooves, points, the „*femmes debout*“, the „*nus*“ from the 1940s and 1950s would then be even more plasmic, touching, motionless, petrified silhouettes that we never reach in space except in visions. Michel Leiris grasped this early on: „I love Giacometti's sculpture because everything he does is like the petrification of one of these crises, the intensity of an affair soon discovered and then instantaneously frozen, the mile marker testifying to it. There is, however, nothing dead in this sculpture; on the contrary, everything is there, as in the true fetishes that can be idolized (the true fetishes are those which resemble us and make up the objectified form of our desire). They are prodigiously alive. There is a graceful life, strongly tinged with humor, a beautiful expression of that sentimental ambivalence, that tender sphinx that is always nourished, more or less secretly, *at the very center of oneself*.“³⁴ But then he was speaking of the work in its infancy: there is no prehistory in Giacometti.

³² Ibid., 96-97.

³³ Barnett Newman, « The Plasmic Image » (1945), in *Selected Writings*, op.cit., 138

³⁴ Michel Leiris, « Alberto Giacometti », *Documents*, no. 4, September 1929, 209–10.