

**The Persistence of Sculptural Abstraction in Alberto Giacometti's
Surrealist Objects, 1929-1935**

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THESIS

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SUMMARY

Alberto Giacometti, a Swiss sculptor who worked in Paris much of his life, was a member of the surrealist group between 1930 and 1935. However, regardless of his surrealist membership, the work he produced defied the prescriptions for the surrealist object and embraced the formal elements of modern art.

In this paper I disassociate Giacometti's work from the representational and symbolic meanings integral to surrealist practice and place his work within a broader modernist conversation of visual art.

By using formal analysis in comparison with his peers, I discover that Giacometti combined aspects of both the modern and the surreal, demonstrating the artists' ability to mesh contradictions of modernism's dedication to form and the universal, and surrealism's dedication to the symbolic and individual.

Through the discovery of this dialectic engagement between the surrealist object and modern abstraction, I conclude that Giacometti produced a unique body of artwork that addressed the anxieties of modern society between the Wars.

I. Introduction

Gazing Head, Modern Sculpture and Giacometti's Situation c. 1929

Gazing Head,¹ completed in plaster in 1929 by Alberto Giacometti (Swiss, 1901-1966) projects a serene feeling, an inquisitive *personality*, if I may say. The title helps describe the sense of tranquility, but the object does seem to gaze. *Gazing Head* is a two-sided plate-like sculpture; the main form is rectangular, although imperfect, and stands upon a short and thinner “neck” connecting to a small rectangular pedestal. One side of the sculpture displays two raised ridges perpendicular to one another; the other side has two smooth ovoid concavities, also perpendicular. It is at once the most basic geometric structure, a rectangle, in a popular subject for sculpture, a bust. But in this work the subject is eclipsed by the form: this sculpture is emphatically modern in that the *form* of the work speaks louder than the abstracted subject.

Giacometti first made this piece out of plaster and later cast it in bronze, the method for a majority of his finished sculptures. The plaster study of *Gazing Head* accentuates the artists' working method, especially on the side with the two depressions: the surface is rough, as if the white paint atop the plaster was slapped on, or the final layer of plaster was worked with a spatula to achieve a rough surface. In the finished bronze version the surface is smooth, and light gently undulates within the depressions and over the protrusions. The bronze appears soft in its finish and patina. Giacometti chose to create a smoother surface where traces of his working method remain barely visible, and the patinated treatment of the bronze almost absorbs light, inviting a return

¹ Illustrated in Reinhold Hohl, *Giacometti: A Biography in Pictures* (New York: Verlag Gerd Harke, 1998), 59.

gaze more so than the white plaster study. The carved depressions and built-up relief on opposite sides of *Gazing Head* represent the two possible working methods of sculpting; one may either chip away at a material (marble, wood, etc.) or build out of that material (plaster, clay, etc.). In this instance, initially the *Gazing Head* was created using plaster, it was born in space where once there was nothing, perhaps a simple explanation but important none-the-less, especially when situating Giacometti's sculptures within the broad cannon of modern sculpture.

Growing into his own in Paris in 1928 and 1929, Giacometti attempted to find a new path away from the Cubist style of manipulating and abstracting planes in the round, culminating in *Gazing Head*. According to Reinhold Hohl, *Gazing Head* demonstrates reconciliation with the problems he was working through in his Cubist and post-Cubist sculpture that he focused on in the late 1920s. *Gazing Head* served as a solution to the problems the artist faced with perception, spatial relationships, and in turn his frustration with representing an individual.² Hohl describes the *Gazing Head* sculptures as the first indication of Giacometti's personal style, freeing him from Cubism to create the work that would beckon him into the surrealist group.³ His association with Cubism led him to working within another branch of the modern movement: surrealism.

² David Sylvester, *Looking at Giacometti* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1994), 139-140. Sylvester transcribes Giacometti's account with depicting the model when studying in Italy as a student Giacometti wrote; "the head of the model in front of me became like a cloud, vague and boldness." Sylvester describes that in Paris between 1922 and 1925, Giacometti tried to work from the model in Bourdelle's class and wrote, "the distance between one side of a nose and the other is like the Sahara, boundless, nothing fixed, everything dissolves."

³ Reinhold Hohl, *Alberto Giacometti* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1971), 80.

Concepts particular to surrealism surround the objects Giacometti created circa 1930 through about 1935. Other sculptors, Barbara Hepworth and Constantine Brancusi for example, share the confidence of form that Giacometti expresses in his work and are not historicized within the surrealist movement but rather the broader category of the *modern* movement. Aside from Giacometti's social relationship with the surrealist group, I am interested in determining which aspects of his work from the 1930s demands or refuses categorization as surrealist. Giacometti chose to position himself with the movement mainly to break from the Cubist and Romantic styles he worked within as a student, because the group offered new ways to synthesize his ideas. Throughout this paper I will demonstrate which concepts Giacometti shares with the surrealists, and also survey the work completed by his peers working at that time who were not considered surreal then, or now. This exercise will demonstrate the fluidity between modern art categories (Dada, Cubism, surrealism) with modern abstraction as the foundation, and also demonstrate Giacometti's ability to mesh the contradictions of modernism's dedication to form and the universal, and surrealism's dedication to the symbolic and individual, to produce a new style of artwork outside of said categories.

In a foundational text by R.H. Wilenski, titled, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* from 1932, Wilenski situates modern sculpture made from about 1905 through World War I as truly modern in that it reflects and symbolizes contemporary culture. Published in 1932, his book illustrates how modern sculpture was perceived at the time, delving into an exploration of the modern sculptors' "creed." Through explanation of the state of sculpture at the time, he sought to remove any "obstacles to appreciation" of modern

sculpture.⁴ Wilenski asserts that modern artists of the 1930s realized that promoting individualism was not a remedy for the machine-age culture developing in the late nineteenth century so instead, Wilenski describes artists in the early twentieth century coming together, forming collective thought to free them from a machine-age despair.⁵

He defines modern sculptors as artists that,

...seek comprehension of universal and constant characters and principles divined behind the individual manifestation. Their work is an aspect and a symbol of modern culture because they have relieved their personal neurosis by accepting the neurosis of the society of which they form a part, and because they conceive in their function to work for the relief of that.⁶

The modern sculpture created in the 1920s and 1930s reflected a change in the state of mind of the contemporaneous social psyche, moving away from the man-made culture to focus on the human condition.

What is most relevant to the discussion of Giacometti's work between 1929 and 1935 is the idea that the only meaning that modern sculpture has is the meaning of form: all other meaning (resemblance, symbolic, erotic) is simply non-sculptural: "*Essential sculpture is sculpture which has the same kind of meaning as the sphere, the cube and the cylinder.*"⁷ My goal in this paper is to disassociate Giacometti's work from the

⁴ Wilenski's text reviews the sculpture of the Greeks, the Renaissance, and Romantic sculptures and their relationship with societies progression and understanding of the human condition. He looks at this in the light of the modern sculpture's education in the 1930s, calling upon both the student and the teacher of sculpture to look outside of their "Philistine" understanding of artwork in three-dimensions and embrace or attempt to understand the importance of modern, form-based sculpture to reflect society.

⁵ R.H. Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1932), 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

representational and *symbolic* meanings associated with surrealism and place it within the broader conversation about what was unique to sculptural meaning between the two wars.

That being said, I must acknowledge that Wilenski's reflection on personal neurosis and its translation into an art object indeed relates to the methods of the surrealist artists and writers. Modern sculpture possesses autonomy and echoes the viewer's autonomy, supporting the belief "that the viewing subject generated out of her or his contemplation of a sculptural object a sense of subjective wholeness that could be located ...in [the sculpture's] inner formal structure."⁸ Wilenski's understanding of the role of subjective experience in modern sculpture's challenge to finality and completion should be seen to follow Auguste Rodin's period of Romantic and expressive abstraction in which figurative work pulls away from representation, allowing for personal reflection. Because the surrealist movement occurred during the period when modern sculpture was emerging and gaining attention not just in galleries but also from contemporary theorists and historians, it should be understood as a niche within the modern movement, and thus the lines between modern sculpture and the surrealist object are inherently blurred. However, surrealism's expectations of resemblance and more clear-cut erotic symbolism, rather than sculptural meaning, suffocate interpretations of Giacometti's work, limiting our ability to draw from a broader modernist context, in which artists believed so strongly in the power of form and its ability to reflect (and even heal) a war-torn modern society.⁹

⁸Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 17-18.

⁹A multitude of factors contribute to France's wounded culture and society after World War I. A literally ravaged countryside and state gave way to a country that wanted to reclaim its greatness as a people after both the Franco-Prussian War and World War I. For more, see Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 5-27.

Because Giacometti worked under the influence of André Breton (1896-1966) and his circle in the early 1930s, his sculpture is in dialogue with the innovations and characteristics typically attributed to surrealist practice: a new emphasis on kinetics, reliance on the dream, depictions of violence – especially toward women – and forms that overtly symbolize or seek to awaken the viewer’s unconscious or repressed fantasies. (See Appendix) Giacometti himself reflects on his surrealist involvement as a transitional “exercise”¹⁰ in practice, realization, and style. I will consider the surrealist aspects of his work at the time, as well as the significance of titles and display techniques in an attempt to see his sculpture from a perspective that incorporates but is not limited to its surrealist interpretations (discussed below). Giacometti’s work uniquely combines abstract sculptural forms with surrealist aesthetics and priorities. This symbiotic pairing demonstrates for the viewer broader issues within modern society in the 1930s.¹¹ I intend to demonstrate that Giacometti’s surrealist sculpture does something quite different from representing the unconscious through the symbolic, and that situating him within the

Silver discusses the crisis of identity surrounding France during pre-war and war time, at the both the front and home front. French culture was already under attack in the years leading up to World War I, having been inundated by German culture since the Franco-Prussian war with products, technologies (trains, automobiles), science, music, art, and political philosophies.

¹⁰ Sylvester, *Looking at Giacometti*, 232.

¹¹ Broader issues enveloped French society at the time such as coping with a new machine age and the economic hardship on French society. A fuller discussion of these issues and their relationship to art can be found in Golan, Romy. *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 61-83. Golan describes the reconciliation artists made during the interwar period with depicting mechanical subjects and organic form, for reasons he argues deal with France’s “paradoxical socio-economic situation in the later 1920s: economically prosperous, it [France] nevertheless suffered from a diminished sense of itself as a major industrial and cultural power.” Golan, *Modernity*, 64. Although internally prosperous, France was still left in a weakened position in international politics and at a disadvantage against the rising economies of England, Germany, and America, which took center stage after WWI.

larger conversation about sculpture in the first half of the twentieth century allows us to consider the ways in which abstraction provided a different answer for the same collective doubts and fears in France at the time, an unease that resulted from the after-effects of World War I and led to a societal neurosis and anxiety that the surrealists responded to directly.¹²

In the time between 1930 and 1935, Giacometti was committed to the surrealist movement, creating work within the theoretical framework of the surrealists; the work he made at this time broke from his previous style as a student and young artist in Paris. Until around 1929, Giacometti made largely representational sculpture: portrait busts and abstractions of everyday objects influenced heavily by Cubism. Giacometti worked as a modernist, concentrating on form, not prescribing to the symbolism of surrealist found-object assemblage.

In this paper I will mainly discuss three sculptures by Giacometti, *Suspended Ball* (1929), *Woman With Her Throat Cut* (1932), and *Head/Skull* (1934). These sculptures support a formal perspective on Giacometti's work during his involvement with surrealism, and trace the abstract and formal experiments made at the time.

Understanding this period as one of transition reveals the fluidity of art categories

¹² See Silver, *Esprit de Corps*, 362-399 for a deeper discussion of the surrealist involvement with French politics and the after shock of World War I. Silver writes of the irreverent stance that the surrealists took to challenge the efforts of the French state to reconstruct an Enlightenment-era culture during the interwar years, "The Surrealist program with its reclamation of the pre-war values that had been relinquished after August 1914 – internationalism and cosmopolitanism, with the concomitant interested in the so-called primitive nations and non-Western cultures; revolutionary sentiment, both specifically in Marxist terms and more generally in a desire to disturb, upset, and overturn the status quo; the anti-hierarchical aesthetic attitudes that valued above all the disenfranchised, the common, and the ephemeral – challenged in the most direct and vocal way the wide-spread capitulation of the Parisian avant-garde to the forces of 'order' and reaction." Silver, *Esprit de Corps*, 396-397.

between the Wars, and describes this fluidity as a by-product of both the independent development of modern art and radical changes in society.

In his biography of Giacometti, James Lord gives an overview of his years just prior to joining the surrealist group. He explains that in 1929 Giacometti was the most ambitious he ever would be in his career, craving approval and success in a new city with new peers. Because of this, he accepted a contract with gallerist Pierre Loeb; Loeb sought out Giacometti, offering him a monthly stipend in exchange for the work he produced. With this relationship Giacometti's work became linked to that of Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Giorgio de Chirico, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Henri Matisse and thus, it was more likely to be viewed in this milieu.¹³

David Sylvester quotes Giacometti reflecting upon his work from 1927 through his time as a surrealist, referencing the *Gazing Head*:

I worked at home forcing myself to reconstitute from memory alone what I had felt at Bourdelle's [his professor] in the presence of the model, and it got reduced to very little. What I really felt got reduced to a plaque, placed in a certain way in space, in which there were just two hollows, which were what could be seen as the vertical and horizontal aspects that are found in every figure. To arrive at the plaque I began by wanting to realize from memory as much as possible of what I'd seen. So I simply began by making an analyzed figure, with legs, a head, and arms. And it all seemed false to me, I didn't believe in it. To make it more what I wanted I was obliged bit by bit to sacrifice, to reduce, to let go the head, the arms and everything. Of the figure, all I was left with was a plaque. And it was never either intentional or satisfactory – on the contrary. It was always disappointing to see that the form I could really master amounted to so little.¹⁴

Noting that Giacometti began working from memory is significant because it began his surrealist trajectory: he was no longer looking at objects in the world to attempt their

¹³ James Lord, *Giacometti: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), 114-115.

¹⁴ Alberto Giacometti, quoted in David Sylvester, *Looking at Giacometti*, 85.

likeness, but creating from his mind, from internal imagery. This quote illustrates that he was at a point in his practice where likeness was no longer his goal. In making *Gazing Head*, Giacometti rejected the traditional ideas of sculpture that he grew up with: accurate portraiture and the desire to capture likeness, as well as those from Cubism, where recognizable objects or figures were abstracted. He adopted the truly modern goal of paring down objects to their essential elements, creating a purity of form: the corner stone to modernism. The *Gazing Head* reduces traceable features of a particular person down to formal and abstract essentials: an object in space propped upon a neck-like pedestal. In this work we see the beginnings of Giacometti's surrealist experiment in his working from his memory rather than from life, however a conflict also immediately appears: Giacometti remains focused on the importance of essential abstract form rather than symbolic gestures to represent these internal images.

Up until his involvement in the surrealist group, Giacometti was working from everyday life, creating representational portraits carved in wood or made from plaster; he also sketched portraits and still-lives. One plaster sculpture, *Portrait Head of the Artist's Father*, 1927-1930¹⁵ demonstrates an attempt at likeness. The plaster is built up from scratch, matches features and represents a likeness of his father's nose, eye sockets, hair texture and growth pattern; he rendered the man's beard and the lines around his mouth and in his forehead. The texture of the plaster material is both smooth and rough: there are carved lines that would not naturally appear on human skin that could perhaps be working method, but other textures, like that of the beard, were made with both tools and the artists' fingers. Giacometti created this bust of his father from memory (he was living

¹⁵ Ills. Hohl, *Giacometti: A Biography*, 54.

in Paris at this time, his father still in Switzerland): this way of working from memory appears again and again through his surrealist involvement. Another portrait bust made around the same year in bronze, while still clearly intended to be a formal portrait, is very unlike the plaster portrait head. *Portrait of the Artist's Father*, 1927-1930¹⁶ was cast from plaster. Giacometti shaped the plaster into a head-like form, giving it protrusions for ears, however the facial features are deliberately simple and shallowly carved into the surface rather than built up. Giacometti moved away from accurate representation while still obviously creating a portrait with recognizable features (for example, the beard). The carved features are almost childlike: wiggly and inconsistent in their depth. Further, the area of the main form where the features are carved is smoothed flat, and the areas around the rest of the portrait are built up and have the same finger-worked texture we saw before.

This comparison of portrait busts demonstrates Giacometti's dedication to finding a new method of working outside of representation and life: he was searching for a way to recreate traditional sculpture and work from memory and imagination and thus, as he wrote, created minimal form and abstracted visions. The surrealist working methods for the creation of the surrealist object were governed by three major goals: automatism for the generation of content, an anti-formal challenge of traditional subject matter and exhibition of objects, and a focus on repressed desires (often sexual). It is with these three major points in mind that I will approach the relationship to surrealism of the sculpture Giacometti made between 1929 and 1935; doing so will both highlight his persistent use of modern form and tension with surrealist goals. Giacometti liberated his work from

¹⁶ Ills. Hohl, *Giacometti: A Biography*, 55.

Classicism and Romanticism through the surrealist association, but he also made sculpture that went beyond the symbolic prescriptions of the surrealist object. Surrealist's dedication to such specific visual/symbolic objectives call upon the viewers' individual neurosis and unique interpretations, veering away from the modernist aim of impersonality.

II. Suspended Ball

*Suspended Ball*¹⁷ was hugely influential to surrealism in accomplishing what the members, Breton in particular, wanted to previously convey through poetry and writing.¹⁸ *Suspended Ball* is an excellent example of the complexities that surround Giacometti's involvement with the surrealist group and his relationship to abstraction. As Rosalind Krauss and Stephen Harris point out, the work is temporal, potentially interactive, and can be read to have overt sexual implications, all of which allow for a reading of the work as anti-formal and thus, inline with surrealist visual goals. These qualities also allow the work to be burdened with a surrealist understanding. Such readings suggest the work was made with the intention of representing and supporting the surrealist mission when closer formal analysis reveals much that also works against this mission. It was in 1930 with the debut of Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* that a prescription for the surrealist object was born. *Suspended Ball* ignited the desire for other artists working under André Breton and the Second Surrealist Manifesto to express their unconscious visions in three dimensions. The sculpture was first exhibited at Galerie Pierre in April 1930, alongside work of Joan Miró and Jean (Hans) Arp.¹⁹ It was at this exhibition that Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) and Breton saw Giacometti's sculpture and invited him to be part of the surrealist group.

Suspended Ball is constructed with a linear cube as a framework, placed upon a pedestal. The legs of the frame are situated exactly to the edge of the pedestal or base, creating both a delicate and precarious situation. The frame is constructed of iron,

¹⁷ Ills. Hohl, *Giacometti: A Biography*, 64.

¹⁸ André Breton, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 126.

¹⁹ Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29.

forming a vertical rectangular box within which, a third from the bottom, are horizontal iron bars with a plaster filling that creates a base for the main forms. This base is convex, curving slightly upward. In the center of the iron frame is a plaster wedge-form with three sides; two of which are flat planes, the third is rounded, like a slice of cantaloupe. The wedge does not sit squarely on its back, it sits further on one end so one point is higher than the other, giving the wedge an upward motion. Carefully placed, the wedge does not protrude from the frame at all, but sits gingerly in the center – tempted (or taunted) by the object hanging above it. The ball of *Suspended Ball* may be the most interesting aspect of the piece (hence, perhaps this title rather than one focusing on the wedge, or even more thought provoking: *Untitled*). The sphere is suspended from an iron bar bisecting the top of the cage, on a length of string extending just slightly above center, and thus slightly above the wedge. Not a full sphere, the ball has an indentation carved into the underside, a cut extending around three-quarters of its circumference such that the integrity of its structure seems compromised—as if it might split open. The indentation falls inline with the crux of the wedge and is placed over the downward slope of the wedge. The iron rod that is the main support of the ball’s weight is perpendicular to the direction of the wedge, creating a linear crisscross of opposing forces within the sculpture as a whole. Though the string is tied carefully and securely to a loop on the supporting rod, the rod is not soldered to the iron frame, suggesting it might be made to progress across the top, moving the ball forward and backward along the length of the wedge. The arrangement and presentation of this work naturally excites the viewer: the logical fitting together of the wedge and ball in combination with the string invite interaction, a new concept in

sculpture and fine art. While the rod could perhaps be moved back and forth, the ball itself asks to be prodded, curiosity surrounding the object's interaction taking hold.

Aspects of *Suspended Ball* do fall in line with the goals of the surrealists because they examine methods of structure and temporality. As mentioned previously, Giacometti focused strongly on the construction and the precision of the forms; he was confronting traditional presentation of sculpture by incorporating movement, but still focusing on essential forms. By employing an arrangement within a cage, along with concepts of temporality and possibility of interaction and movement, *Suspended Ball* is a complex realization that still challenged conservative and traditional sculpture at the time. In this way, Giacometti's piece does uphold the surrealist anti-formal goal: to confront what people believed to be true about sculpture and about reality with the obscure and unknown.

At the time, reflecting on the work, Giacometti wrote that he wanted real movement because he no longer wanted to represent movement, "...it was impossible for me to endure a sculpture which gave an illusion of movement, a leg advancing, a raised arm, a head looking sideways. Such movement I only wanted if real and effective. I also wanted to give the sensation of provoking it."²⁰ His desire to create movement in his work was probably not related to the surrealists' interest in including moving elements in sculpture because it was a seminal work that likely influenced the others that followed. By adding this frustration with perceived movement and using simplified forms, Giacometti created a new sculptural style. Giacometti was pushing the envelope, looking to create something original, and as with *Gazing Head*, he decided that solely

²⁰ Alberto Giacometti, "A Letter," in *Surrealists on Art*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), 147.

representing real movement was tiresome and weak, just as he felt both conflicted and bored by attempting to represent a human form with *Gazing Head*.

Dalí quickly praised the possibility of movement in this sculpture and in turn added kinetics to his prescription for surrealist objects, including movement in his own work. Krauss writes, “[t]his course to real movement and literal time is a function of the meaning of surreality as taking its place alongside and within the world at large, sharing the temporary conditions of that world – but being shaped by an interior need.”²¹ To illustrate, take, for example, Dalí’s *Surrealist Object Functioning Symbolically* (1931). This sculpture is constructed of found objects popular with Breton and those artists connected to Dada.²² Dalí uses a woman’s red leather pump, balanced upon a matchbox and black pedestal, with a wooden spoon in front, along with two sugar cubes with the shape of a shoe printed upon them.²³ A “T” shape constructed of wood rises above the shoe, acting as support for a weighted lever system that lowers objects into the front and back openings of the shoe. This work is similar to Giacometti’s – both have a main focal point in a linear framework, both use string as means of suspension, both have objects balanced and set upon a pedestal or “stage.” However Dalí created his sculpture to be an “object that functioned symbolically” in that it truly functions: the string goes up, the sugar comes down and dissolves in milk, an invitation for the viewer to interact with

²¹ Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 114.

²² During the Dada movement, Marcel Duchamp in particular was intrigued by the idea of chance as described well by Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Chapter 3. The early surrealists were interested in found objects not so much because of chance, but to see what their unconscious was drawn to and what marled or deformed objects could bring out of their unconscious minds.

²³ Described particularly well and illustrated in Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought*, 44.

the piece.²⁴ The movement creates a narrative line of thought. This imagined participation is necessary, for the symbolic aspects of the sculpture cannot be followed through without intervention. Here, symbolic functioning is a mechanical process. The assemblage surrealist objects made by Dalí also function symbolically in that the found objects he curated were assumed to have associated meaning *a priori*. In the case of the *Surrealist Object Functioning Symbolically*, the red leather pump symbolizes a particular type of woman, the possibility of sugar dissolving in milk a realization of oral fetish.

Dalí promoted the notion of symbolic functioning and continued to use the idea throughout his own work, believing that certain objects would spark repressed desires and free our unconscious minds from the shackles of reality. Finding and assembling such objects: a red pump, a sugar cube, a matchbox, is exactly the opposite of how Giacometti worked. In *Suspended Ball*, Giacometti planned and crafted his formal elements from plaster, and as with *Gazing Head*, *Suspended Ball* was made from his imagination and built up from nothing. The basic construction of *Suspended Ball* demonstrates planning by the artist, it is clear simply by observing the structure of the cube Giacometti took care in determining the scale, material and overall presence of this work as opposed to curating pre-made objects. As with *Gazing Head*, he uses a basic formal composition: linear rectangular frame around two objects in relation in the center, embracing a modern tactic in whittling the presentation down to simplified forms of cube and sphere. Because Giacometti did not employ assemblage with his surrealist work, his

²⁴ Mark Polizzotti states the sugar cube “could be dipped” but not that it was intended to actually happen while on display, Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, 384. Stephen Harris writes the *implication* is that the sugar can be dipped; see Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought*, 44; footnotes also describe the function of the piece in Dalí’s essay, “The Object as Revealed...”, 89.

elements come with fewer predetermined or prescribed associations, as surrealist objects from this point forward would consistently exhibit. In this way, *Suspended Ball* and the sculptures Giacometti went on to make between 1930 and 1935 do not fully adhere to the surrealist encouragement to utilize pre-existing, *premade* every day objects.

As with the assemblage techniques that surrealist artists embraced, the Freudian notion of fetish applies to Dalí's work in ways that it does not to Giacometti's. Johanna Malt's *Obscure Objects of Desire: Surrealism, Fetishism, and Politics* offers a helpful understanding of the fetish as it relates to surrealism after 1930.²⁵ The fetish, according to Freud, becomes the last thing one was fixated upon before experiencing the traumatic event of castration of the mother, or perceiving woman's castration. This is typically why surrealists focused on using textures that related directly to the woman's body: velvet, fur, feathers, and hair, as well as shoes and underwear: these objects/textures are eroticized in the wake of the fetish, becoming symbolically gendered and erotically charged.²⁶ The castration trauma relates to suppression, and with surrealist objects, "...the more the fetish exhibits itself, the more the presence of a traumatic past event is signified,"²⁷ which creates a cyclical tension between denial of the traumatic event and

²⁵ Johanna Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire, Surrealism, Fetishism, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 113. Malt's text focuses on the commodity and is decidedly written from a Marxist perspective; she places Walter Benjamin, Hal Foster, and Theodor Adorno in conversation regarding the term and concept of aura and its relationship to the commodity fetish as discussed by Marx. While written in this perspective, Malt's description of the fetish situated Dalí, in particular, within the political and social climate of the 1930s pertains more to my study. She writes that particular to the surrealist object (as opposed to something created under Dada) "...is the introduction of the body into this process [of making], invoking, in the direct use of bodily imagery, both the commodified body and the eroticized commodity." Malt, *Obscure Objects*, 113.

²⁶ Discussed in more detail in the essay by Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," (1927).

²⁷ Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire*, 135.

wanting to understand or re-experience such an event. The anxiety caused by such suppression is what surrealists like Dalí wanted to express through the surrealist object.

Dalí praised *Suspended Ball* for its perversion and sexual overtones, he described the object as having a “feminine groove,”²⁸ indicating the eroticism it was perceived to contain and for which it was praised. Knowing the ball had the ability to move back and forth and possibly brush the edge of the plaster segment does evoke a sexual engagement, not just through the wedge-shape and their fitting together, but also through the intense possibility of touch. At the time, Maurice Nadeau wrote how the work made everyone who viewed it feel sexually charged,²⁹ and Krauss also mentions the sculpture’s “explicit eroticism.”³⁰ To the surrealists, the type of sexual encounter presented in this work was seen as violent – the slash and missing flesh of the sphere. That the sphere cannot escape its position over the wedge poignantly recalls the scene in *Un Chien andalou*, (1929) the short film by Luis Buñuel, where a woman’s eye is sliced open and a gelatinous substance oozes from the incision.

Suspended Ball’s relationship to and demonstration of sexuality is different from works by Dalí and Buñuel in that it does not contain texture or objects that can be directly related or that have a symbolic relation to the fetish. The shapes are *not explicitly* sexual nor are they orally stimulating, as with much of Dalí’s work. Hal Foster believes that *Suspended Ball* is sexually ambiguous.³¹ The audience is unable to determine which part of the sculpture is meant to be male and which to be female: the power play is equally

²⁸ Salvador Dalí, quoted in Christian Klemm, et. al., *Alberto Giacometti* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 20.

²⁹ Krauss, *Passages*, 113. Originally discussed in Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du Surréalisme* (Seuil, 1970).

³⁰ Krauss, *Passages*, 113.

³¹ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 92.

unclear: which object is trapped? We can see that Giacometti possibly intended to demonstrate the castration wound, yet his version does not make a show of blood or gore, rather he poeticizes the trauma with clean lines and geometric forms. The ball and the wedge are only suggestive of body parts, the perfectly measured slice only a distant evocation of a real wound. What separates Giacometti's sculpture from surrealism's more gruesome sexual metaphors is the openness of its abstraction.

Giacometti's approach to sexuality and embodiment is much closer to Barbara Hepworth's. Hepworth's modernist abstract sculpture *Two Forms* (1933)³² works with concepts of form and space that similarly expand beyond mere demonstrations of temporality and the scripted eroticism of surrealism. Made of alabaster upon a limestone base, *Two Forms* accentuates the quality of the stone: the color, veins, texture, all become part of the piece – the audience can imagine the hand-feel. Hepworth's sculpture produces a similar sense of charged physical encounter that we experience with *Suspended Ball*. In *Suspended Ball* the sphere and wedge are mere centimeters from coupling, while in *Two Forms* the distinct parts are already nestled within each other.

Sitting upon a small, grey, circular base, the foundational stone in *Two Forms* is in the shape of a "V", rising upwards to catch a solid oblong stone within the crux of its prongs. The perpendicular form can be removed from its resting place within the tongs, and also appears to be precarious: the moveable stone is rather flat, but wider at one end, tapering into an uneven triangle. Eroticism is indeed present in this piece, just as with *Suspended Ball*, but Anne Wagner's authoritative account of the work in *Mother Stone* easily steers clear of the sexual rhetoric surrounding surrealism, even though the

³² Illustrated in Anne M. Wagner, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), fig. 136, p. 163.

sculpture was created at the movement's height. Wagner speaks of *Two Forms* as explicitly female: in the sculpture's enveloping curves the idea of a childbearing mother comes through. To Wagner, the moveable stone is not a phallus but an offspring. She writes that this sculpture's "hollows and ridges remember the female pelvis and hips in both sight and feel. They recall... what it is like to be contained in a skin, while feeling your own muscles and bones as deep layers forming a surface terrain."³³

The abstracted form of Hepworth and essential forms used by Giacometti allow for a modern read of the sculpture as provided previously by Wilenski: these artists are looking to find a universal experience and an experience that represents and relieves neurosis within their society. Like Hepworth's *Two Forms*, *Suspended Ball* offers a formal relationship that is erotic without being explicit. Its forms are suggestive of particular sense impressions (like Hepworth's remembrances of pelvis and muscle within skin) without fastening that experience down with the particular identities of objects in the world. Both *Suspended Ball* and *Two Forms* are hand made, with detachable and moving parts; both are abstract and express ideas concerning human relationships. For Hepworth, one could read the forms representing detachment but discover also a problem with the balance of relationships and question of support. In Giacometti's case, the *Suspended Ball* stands in for two major contemporaneous societal anxieties: a feeling of

³³ Wagner, *Mother Stone*, 164.

political and stately entrapment occurring in interwar France,³⁴ and the popular Freudian ideas of unconscious desires and sexual perversion.^{35/36}

³⁴ See Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought*, 137-143 for a discussion on the rise of the Communist Party in France (Parti Communiste Français) against the growing threat of Fascism and its effect on the surrealist group's thought and practice.

³⁵ See Amy Lyford, *Surrealists Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 12-13, 143. Lyford discusses the contemporaneous view of Freudian ideas in relation to interwar French society and the surrealists embrace of Freud as promoting perversion as a means to a liberated unconscious as it relates to surrealist making. She also discusses the state of France encouraging nationalistic and enlightenment-era values of family and gender stereotypes, fueling the surrealists efforts to present unconventional views of sexuality.

³⁶ See Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia*, 15-16 for a discussion of the "stigma of the wound of the trench" and the "primordial struggle" of soldiers and those who did not serve in World War I.

III. The Surrealist Object: A Review

Suspended Ball and the publication of the Second Manifesto in 1929 (see Appendix) changed the direction of the surrealist group; Giacometti introduced interactive sculpture, and the Second Manifesto sparked a rotation of members. While many members of the surrealist group created sculptural assemblages, Dalí brought the surrealist object to an apogee. The surrealist object relates to the idea of commodity fetish, a concept adopted by Andre Breton and the surrealists inspired by the writings of both Freud and Marx. This form of sculpture introduces the corporeal into the art-making process, meshing the concept of commodity and the sexualized body.³⁷ The surrealist object further extends from a found object or chance encounter as established by Dada roughly ten years earlier. Broadly, a surrealist object is “a physical intervention into the world of other objects” as concisely defined by Steven Harris in his text, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s*.³⁸

Harris deftly describes surrealism as “research into the workings of thought” above art, expression, and autonomy of form or representation,³⁹ which I find to be a grounding idea when thinking about surrealism’s methodology. Harris also discusses the differences between avant-gardism and modernism, a comparison that also interested

³⁷ Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire*, 113.

³⁸ Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought*, 6. Harris’ text focuses on the surrealist group between 1929 and 1939 and describes the relationships the members had to the social and political world and how it affected the movement’s activity and engagement with the production of art and poetry. He follows from the *October* school, crediting Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster as influencing his work. Overall his text seeks to engage with surrealism on the same level of complexity with which it was founded, approaching the subject historically, making clear the social climate in which the movement was founded.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Louis Aragon, who said that surrealism expresses itself through modern society, but itself is not modern.⁴⁰ Harris writes,

For all the surrealists, in fact, modernism's preoccupation with formal values is what allows it to be recuperated as the decorative style of modern industrial society, and the difference they make with it turns precisely on this question of form. This is why their [surrealists] own work, whether verbal or visual, is so often anti-formal and antiaesthetic, despite its generally experimental nature.⁴¹

Giacometti is able to balance both a dedication to form (formal values) while still questioning the connotations of said form: simply because he did not create sculpture from found objects, as the other surrealists did, does not mean he supported modern industrial style or decorative aesthetics. These two points – one of physical intervention and perceptual challenges – relate to Giacometti's motivation, I believe. He mentions in an interview in 1964 with Sylvester that he felt he had something in common with the surrealists – although what that something was went undefined.⁴²

I believe Giacometti would have accepted Harris' definition of the surrealist object: "a physical intervention into the world of other objects"⁴³ because it is not weighted with guidelines and rules for subject matter and intention, as is Dalí's definition published in the early 1930s. Not until the Second Manifesto in 1929 and Dalí's induction into the group do we see a deliberate form of introspection into the unconscious among the surrealist artists: looking inward for ways to actively trigger unconscious conflicts in the audience. In *The Object as Revealed in Surrealist Experiment*, 1932, Dalí summarizes the evolution or phases of the surrealist object. He begins by addressing

⁴⁰ Ibid., 23, quoted from Louis Aragon, "Introduction à 1930," *La Revolution surréaliste*, no. 12 (15 décembre 1929), p. 62.

⁴¹ Ibid., 24.

⁴² Giacometti quoted in Sylvester, *Looking at Giacometti*, 233.

⁴³ Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought*, 6.

Duchamp's work *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy?* (1921), calling it a trick, something you thought was lightweight but ended up being quite heavy because of its material (marble stones fill a cage and are carved to resemble sugar cubes); and Man Ray's *Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, 1920, writing of the desire to touch it to discover what was hidden beneath the blanket tied up with twine (a sewing machine). Dalí cites both objects as existing in reality but outside of oneself, reveling the desire to touch an object but also experience objects as dreams.⁴⁴ He continues to follow the evolution of the object with the help of Breton's essay, *Introduction to a Speech on the Poverty of Reality*, where Breton describes how the object reflects our dreams and speaks to our desires, he writes that the poets' creations are destined to become tangible to challenge the real. Dalí then traces the object to something that moves, and lastly to an object that leads us to be at one with it, where he famously uses a metaphor of hunger, desire, and edibility of an object.

Also within this essay Dalí provides suggested methods of development for surrealist objects, which involve automatic writing, making automatic sculpture, describing objects orally, and writing directly onto objects. Surrealism's working methods and the creation of the surrealist object relied on the artist working automatically, writing freely, and accessing their personal dreams and unconscious. They also embraced the anti-formal and sought to challenge the traditional forms of writing and the visual world. Lastly, the surrealists focused on repressed sexual desires, in addition to other fetishized yearnings.

⁴⁴ Dalí, Salvador, "The Object as Revealed in Surrealist Experiment," trans. David Gascoyne, in *Surrealists on Art*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) 89.

IV. Woman with Her Throat Cut

Though Giacometti never embraced the assemblage working method, or created sculptures or drawings automatically, he write about his memories and dreams. Another work he did as a surrealist, *Woman With her Throat Cut*, 1932,⁴⁵ meets Dalí's requirements for the surrealist object more than his others from this period. *Woman with Her Throat Cut* has overt violent and sexual overtones with both the title and the disturbing look of the piece: a mangled, twisted pile of biomorphic bronze forms strewn upon the floor. While Giacometti mentioned with the making of *Suspended Ball* that he sought real movement rather than perceived movement, *Woman with Her Throat Cut* demonstrates movement both literal and imaginary; it is made of parts both moveable and fixed. The texture of this sculpture (in bronze, the plaster no longer exists) is smooth and buffed with a polished patina: a texture that compares to a lobster's shell.

Giacometti wrote a text that is often associated with *Woman with her Throat Cut* titled, "Yesterday, Moving Sands" published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la revolution* in 1933;⁴⁶ it is a dream-fantasy of him breaking into a castle in the forest, capturing a mother and daughter, and raping and killing both of them in the woods. This fantasy is often placed in direct relation to *Woman with Her Throat Cut* because it formally demonstrates suffering – a writhing body frozen in time, legs spread to the viewer, aggressively twisting, and perhaps the most overt, the placement of the piece on the floor rather than pedestal (showing neglect or gesture of worthlessness). This is easily the most sexualized sculpture by Giacometti, and perhaps his most purely surrealist work.

⁴⁵ Ills. Hohl, *Giacometti: A Biography*, p. 99.

⁴⁶ Giacometti, Alberto, "Yesterday, Moving Sands," trans. Lucy R. Lippard, in *Surrealists on Art*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard, 143. Originally published in *Le Surréalisme au Service de la revolution*, no. 5 (1933).

But above the symbolic references, like *Suspended Ball*, *Woman with Her Throat Cut* does not adhere to the surrealist method of automatic creation and assemblage.

Giacometti had planned this sculpture and made two different iterations, as seen from sketches and mockups he did of his studio in 1932.^{47/48} In this instance, it is the working method and abstraction of personified form that separates Giacometti from the surrealists' visual goals. His subject matter and supposed influence for the work – from a repressed fantasy – are decidedly surreal.⁴⁹ *Suspended Ball* did not *stand* for anything personal or individual, while *Woman With Her Throat Cut* does. But it is the making in this case sets it apart and retains Giacometti's modernist tendencies – constructed abstract form.

While *Woman With Her Throat Cut* is perhaps the most direct of Giacometti's works in depicting an abstracted violence, he also simplified the human form in a more recognizable and non-symbolic way. Three elongated female forms were made between 1932 and 1935. The first two *Walking Woman*, 1932 and *Walking Woman I*, plaster, 1932 are extremely similar to one another (and also similar to a work he completed years

⁴⁷ Ills. Hohl, *Giacometti: A Biography*, 69.

⁴⁸ One of the sketches shows an alien-like figure, withered and desperate lying on the floor amongst other works that Giacometti had realized. The second sketch shows an even stranger outline of a similar vein, but hanging from a string across the wall. In this sketch the sculpture does not look human at all. It is much more like an insect, with an abdomen or thorax and six separate extremities, some parts dangling freely. The last hint of premeditation is seen in a sculpture from 1932 titled *Suffering Woman in her Room at Night*, made from plaster and destroyed. This sculpture has a geometric component on one end standing upright, leading into the opposite side end which lies across the ground organically. These can be seen illustrated in Hohl, *Giacometti: A Biography*, 98.

⁴⁹ One could also connect *Woman With Her Throat Cut* to a broader modern, post-war anxiety as it relates to France in the 1920s: the discarded organic form relates to societies' familiarity with their ravaged land, and thus ravaged fertility. See Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia*, 18.

before, *Woman Chest*, c. 1925.) The third sculpture *The Invisible Object*, 1934/35⁵⁰ would be one of his final sculptures made while involved with the surrealists.

The two Walking Women, both in plaster, were completed the same year as *Woman With Her Throat Cut* but completely lacked its disturbing and aggressive qualities. The Walking Women are nude, Cycladic in their simplicity and stance: they have one leg placed in front of the other and a slight shift in the angle of the shoulder. The breasts, buttocks and vagina are inconspicuous, the elongated form are the focus. One aspect is obvious: these torsos lack neck, head, and arms. The surrealists would find this disembodiment within the realm of the uncanny as they resemble the one pre-made form ripe for assemblage: the mannequin. As Malt writes, the mannequin became a reoccurring item of use in the surrealist practice:

If we look more closely at the image of the body in surrealism, and in the surrealist object in particular, we see that it is almost always mediated as an object ... [the bodies] are not modeled by the artist from life, nor, indeed, are they sculptures in any traditional sense. They are pre-existing representations of human forms: dummies, models, mannequins whose lives as objects are independent of their use they are put to in surrealist art.⁵¹

The mannequin's preprocessing of human form was both uncanny and fetishistic to the surrealists, and the severing of limbs references the castration wound discussed in relation to *Suspended Ball*.⁵² The surrealists sought to use mannequins or masks as bodily representation, but it is again important to note that Giacometti did not seek objects or products to make his work: being one step removed from the mass-production and discovery process so beloved by the surrealists truly sets him apart.

⁵⁰ Ills. Hohl, *Giacometti: A Biography*, 79.

⁵¹ Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire*, 137.

⁵² Discussed in-depth in Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire*, 136-143.

Giacometti's decision to create these sculptures without heads, necks, or arms first acts to simplify the female form, as he did with the *Gazing Head*, and second references an early modernist formal approach to sculpting bodies. For example, Rodin purposefully removed limbs to replicate the fragmented Greek sculptures so popular at the time he was working, as well as give a sense of movement and dynamism to his monumental figures.⁵³ *Walking Woman I* does have an interesting twist: a small but obvious triangle-shaped chunk was carved from her chest, beneath and between her breasts, giving the sculpture a more surrealist tone than *Walking Woman*. The breasts and depression almost make a face, but also reference the concept of the void seen in *The Invisible Object*. *The Invisible Object* is the third representational female form Giacometti created as a surrealist. It is, again, elongated, but semi-seated within a framework, given a seat and a plank where her shins are able to rest. Much has been written on this masterpiece of the artist, in this case I simply want to draw attention to its relatively realistic and formal quality in opposition to *Woman With Her Throat Cut* and highlight the simplified, Cycladic form that Giacometti achieved while working as a surrealist.

⁵³ Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, 7.

V. Head/Skull

Unlike *Suspended Ball* that is disassociated from representational meaning, the next sculpture I will discuss, *Head/Skull* (1934)⁵⁴ is an abstracted geometric rendering of a human head. This is one of the last sculptures Giacometti made under the surrealist umbrella, along with *The Invisible Object*. He made three different but very similar versions of *Head/Skull* in plaster and cast them in bronze. The Alberto and Annette Giacometti Foundation consider these his surrealist heads, however there is nothing explicitly surreal about them. Some argue these abstract skulls were made in an attempt to create the perfect head to accompany *The Invisible Object*, with which he was known to have struggled.⁵⁵ *Head/Skull* represents a culmination of the sculpture Giacometti worked through as an artist before and during the early 1930s.

Head/Skull is cold and mechanical. The features of the human face are again, abstracted, as with *Gazing Head*, with a dip to indicate an eye-socket, and hollowed depression to act as a mouth, but they are slick, squared and sliced from one plane to another. *Head/Skull* has a presence, substance, it is fully in the round: if one were to pick up this work they would be holding a full, three-dimensional object, a 'real' head. The placement of such sculpture on a pedestal or table, devoid of a neck or other support implies a vulnerability that *Gazing Head* does not have. And while this sculpture is seen as a study for a larger project, Giacometti was not one to keep work that he was not proud

⁵⁴ Ills. Hohl, *Giacometti: A Biography*, 80.

⁵⁵ There is an interesting account of Breton writing on Giacometti's struggle with the head for this piece. He recalls them walking through a flea market of sorts, and Giacometti finding a mask that would fit the sculpture perfectly. Giacometti is said to have denied this ever happening, and as we see the finished piece does not have a found object as a head. For the full account see Hohl, *Giacometti: A Biography*, 77-78.

of, or that he found to have failed;⁵⁶ he therefore deemed it important in its own right, treating it as finished work. The faceted planes of the piece are similar to the Cubist style of abstraction, where the audience understands the form to be representational, but fragmented and linearly abstracted. Its allusion to a mask or mechanically made object comes from the surrealists, an encounter with an object familiar but strange. Finally the piece is semi-representational, and can be seen as a diversion back toward the artist working from life, making portraits and busts with a likeness.

Head/Skull's smooth, cool surfaces show no signs of working method and seem to have been manufactured. The angles are sharp and defined and the forms deliberate. The dense, mass-produced feel of the in no way appears to be a surrealist object. While not assemblage, the idea of finding or coming across an object that surprises the viewer, or sparks an unconscious reaction in the viewer applies here: since the sculpture is void of any proof of the artist's working methods, and opposed to his choice of style with *Woman With Her Throat Cut*, here he replicates the idea of the found object, in that it could be a mask, or mass-produced mannequin head. Head-like though it may be, it is petrified and abandoned, mouth ajar and set on a surface unceremoniously.

While *Gazing Head* and *Suspended Ball* also have smooth, worked surfaces, the texture and shape of the objects have a hand-made feel that *Head/Skull* lacks. Perhaps it is the black patina, or the sharp edges, but its creation mimics that of carved stone. In the same book cited previously, Wilenski discusses the difference between carving and

⁵⁶ There are accounts of Giacometti throwing away artwork due to lack of space, because of moving, or destroying plasters simply because he did not like how they were materializing. The work that has made it to the public eye did so only with his hard-earned approval. For more specifics, see Véronique Wiesinger, "Giacometti's Studio: A Site of Unbounded Adventure," in *The Studio of Alberto Giacometti*, ed. Véronique Wiesinger (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), 19-51.

modeling, modeling being the “weaker” working method. As noted, Giacometti primarily modeled his work from plaster, a method that Wilenski believes can give no inspiration to the sculptor. But carving from a block of marble, he believes, creates an inspired relationship between the sculptor and the material, a collaboration with the substance; the artist envisions a form within the stone, and the stone helps guide the sculptor toward what the material ‘wants’ to be. This is very true of Hepworth, who primarily carved from stone. Her work *Two Forms* is carved from alabaster, so in Wilenski’s view, the original block of this luminous stone revealed the pronged and wedge shape to her. It is a painstaking and noble working method. I quite like the description Wilenski gives of working with clay: “[c]lay is not a substance with permanent character: it is mud in the process of becoming dust.”⁵⁷ It is meant to be pejorative, but because the character of plaster is not ‘fixed’ until cast in bronze, in Giacometti’s case, the working and re-working and destruction and dissolution of the material becomes an integral part of the artists’ practice just as with finding form within stone.

Giacometti’s *Head/Skull* finds a modernist counterpoint in Brancusi’s *The Newborn*, 1920.⁵⁸ I will focus on the bronze version of this work because of its relation to Giacometti’s production method (the bronze cast is a modified version of a very similar sculpture he made of 1915 in marble). Brancusi’s *Newborn* is a polished golden ovoid, gleaming and reflective of its surroundings. The sculpture is not a perfect egg shape: there is a plane, a severing, extending down – almost unnoticeable, from the back of the oval, just off center, suggesting the ridge of a nose or a cheek. This meets with a dramatic slice taken from the opposite end of the oval, revealing a flat plane that is incomplete,

⁵⁷ Wilenski, *Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, 99.

⁵⁸ Ills. Wagner, *Mother Stone*, fig. 80, p. 104.

ending in a convex lip. While Brancusi did incorporate both carving and fabrication into his practice, this bronze sculpture looks fresh off the conveyor belt, more so than *Head/Skull* thanks to the conspicuous sheen. Krauss writes of its finish, “Brancusi’s art was in no way guided by a ‘truth to materials’ ethos in which, along with Henry Moore and Jean (Hans) Arp’s sculpture, it was subsequently placed.”⁵⁹ Brancusi was not looking to find the form within the stone, nor allowing for the natural state of a material to take precedence.

Newborn, like many of Brancusi’s sculptures and Giacometti’s *Head/Skull* is placed directly on a pedestal or surface, giving the piece a familiar but strange position in the world: somehow both casual and unusual. One difference is that Brancusi’s sculpture is precarious without a determinable orientation, while Giacometti’s geometric head has a flat plane upon which to rest. Both sculptures rely on modernist ideals of adhering to purity of form to communicate a universal subjectivity. The traditional method of sculpting is taken up with the artists’ deliberate modeling, casting and installation on any flat surface, without a pedestal or vitrine. Making a human head abstract and in a mechanical (looking) way speaks to the collective modern cultural anxiety related to industrialized society. Because they lack individual qualities, they speak both to the loss of individuality, the industrialized society, and the promotion of the collective psyche. (I cannot help but be reminded of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), where robot-Maria in comes to life with the mission to destroy the city.)

It was with *Head/Skull* and *The Invisible Object* that Giacometti took leave of the surrealist group. The story differs depending on the source as to whether Giacometti left

⁵⁹ Krauss, *Passages*, 100.

the group willingly or was banished by Breton. According to Polizzotti, a meeting of several surrealist members, Breton included,

turned into a bitter referendum on the ‘aesthetically frivolous and historically redundant’ direction Giacometti was taking; Breton dismissed his latest effort, a bust, with a contemptuous ‘Everybody knows what a *head* is!’ Pressed to defend his recent art, Giacometti instead repudiated his earlier Surrealist works as ‘masturbation’ and stormed out. Breton then formalized the break with a public notice of exclusion.⁶⁰

Head/Skull and *The Invisible Object* led Giacometti into a rediscovery of working from life. The meaning of his retort, that his surrealist works were masturbatory, can only be speculated. Mainly I believe that because the surrealists were so inwardly focused he might have seen the work he was creating to be self-indulgent. He was working from personal imagination and memory rather than life and creating abstraction from life. Regardless of who left whom, Giacometti consciously moved away from the abstraction of form and imaginary subject matter back to representation.

⁶⁰ Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 409.

VI. Conclusion

That Giacometti worked as a surrealist and was a part of Breton's circle provided artists at the time, and still gives historians now, a simplified category in which to place the work Giacometti made prior to World War II; this poses a problem because the reading of the work and its value to modern sculpture as a whole becomes easily overlooked. Throughout his time as a surrealist, Giacometti remained focused on the importance of essential abstract form rather than symbolic gestures to represent these internal images; he continued to work as a modernist, not fully prescribing to surrealist ideologies and symbolism. Notions of structure, the body, and relationships were themes that Giacometti was interested in pursuing, and did so by combining aspects of both the modern and the surreal.

Giacometti was working in a Paris where the surrealists were prominent pioneers, a new faction of modernist avant-garde,⁶¹ and his participation in their meetings and their company clearly influenced his work. However, the formal quality of his work, indeed the pure sculptural foundation of his work – to utilize form primarily – sets him apart from his surrealist counterparts. His refusal to use assemblage denounced the commodity obsession of the surrealists, and in a way refutes the surrealist style overall. When compared to artists such as Hepworth, who worked with similar subjects in a similar vein during the same period, or Brancusi years earlier, the connection Giacometti has to modern form and abstraction is clear. He pursued formal qualities such as simplified abstracted form that often lacked evident representation or symbolism, leaving the meaning of the form to dominate. Any readings that did occur based off of his

⁶¹ For a discussion of the surrealists' interest and objection to the term avant-garde, see Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought*, 15-17, 24.

abstractions can be interpreted universally (the urge to interact with *Suspended Ball*, or the feeling of neglect or danger in *Woman With Her Throat Cut*, for example). These more universal interpretations uphold the modern goal and belief that through form an aesthetic connection could be had across generations and gender and politics.

The surrealists worked from imagination, personal dreams and memories with the goal of exciting the repressed desires of each viewer: a focus that called upon the individual far more than the modernists. Their compulsion to create symbolic work limits the ability of the viewer to experience the “subjective wholeness” that is important to the modern aspiration of universal understanding. Abstraction allowed Giacometti to deal with the surrealist themes by boiling down their desire to adhere to personal repressions and the unconscious in order to open the floor to more universal anxieties.

To conclude, just as various contradictions can be found throughout surrealism’s guidelines (see Appendix), Giacometti’s work both adheres to and rejects aspects of surrealism. Giacometti remained more dedicated to abstract form than symbolic meaning in order to represent images and forms related to the neurosis of modern society. As a surrealist, Giacometti synthesized the contradictions between modernism and the modern offshoot of surrealism. Giacometti’s sculptures at this time do more than represent dreams or his personal anxieties; they provide insight into the psyche of the modern society between the two Wars by weaving together abstraction and personal gesture. After World War I and into the 1930s, France suffered wounds both internally and externally as a state and culture – economically, psychologically, and physically as wounded soldiers returned. Through Giacometti’s use of essential forms (cube, cylinder, sphere) his sculpture is separated from the pointed literary and symbolic goals of the

surrealists and allows for a fuller understanding of the complexities of modern society in the 1930s. Where the surrealist would mock the attempt of the state to uphold societal norms, Giacometti's work, though its abstraction and thus, universality, was able to speak to the collective anxieties within interwar France.

Giacometti said in an interview regarding his involvement with the surrealists, “[t]he fact that I was interested in them meant that we had something in common. And maybe it’s still there, somewhere...”⁶² Perhaps the attraction was, in fact, the contradiction: he became involved with a movement that was accepting of exploration and blind enough to the importance of the modern formal elements of sculpture that he could work along side the surrealists conceptually but be independent from them formally.

Without a dialectical engagement between Giacometti's personal neurosis (working from imagination to create representational abstraction) and using modern methods of a universal formal abstraction, the artwork would be stagnant. The combination of geometric, abstract, and surrealist influence elevates the sculptures above that of the surrealist singular symbolic object-representation to a level where the human *spirit* can be represented: the possibility for something new and mindful to be created.⁶³ Within the synthesis of the dialectic, Giacometti's work accessed and addressed universal elements present within the society of which he was a part.

⁶² Sylvester, *Looking at Giacometti*, 233, 237.

⁶³ Concept described in Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000), 229-268.

Appendix

An Overview of Surrealism

From the start of my research on surrealism, I have found it to be a contradictory movement, where the unconscious mind was deliberately harnessed to create deliberately bizarre artwork. Breton's understanding of Freud's analysis of the unconscious was flawed, or perhaps intentionally misconstrued from the beginning. Foster notes that Breton's conception of the unconscious was "charmed"⁶⁴ because he focused so heavily on perception and representation of the conscious waking world, as well as reconciling madness and reason. Freud's goal in accessing the unconscious and analyzing automatist acts was to understand our primordial and primitive associations, as well as understand our desires, needs of fulfillment and internal conflicts. Breton, on the other hand saw the unconscious as an untapped resource and a gateway into a new and less constrained reality.⁶⁵

The surrealist movement is complex and multifaceted. The movements occurring before surrealism: Cubism, Dada, Futurism, and Romanticism influenced artists and writers associated with the group. Set between the two World Wars, the height of surrealist movement existed within a war torn France, torn both physically (in landscape and bodily disfigurement), ideologically, and politically. The surrealist movement clung to the idea that the unconscious mind was suppressed by modern bourgeois society, and that only through 'acts of madness' could one access the unconscious. Alberto Giacometti entered the group at the time of the political upswing in the surrealist group and rapid movement of members. More important than the conceptual strengthening or

⁶⁴ Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, 4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

shifting of the group after 1929 is the inclusion and encouragement of constructed artwork, which was displayed in exhibition spaces as well as in print.

The surrealist group was founded around 1920 by André Breton with the support of Philippe Soupault, Paul Éluard, Benjamin Péret, and Louis Aragon, stemming from their joined interest in Dada, Cubism, Futurism, and the emerging popularity of analyzing the human psyche. The movement was more than a stylistic call for unconscious exploration; it attempted to release the anxieties of a war-torn society, unlike Dada before it, that reveled in the destruction (anti-art) and incomprehensible acts (chance) of World War I.

Breton's past involvement with Dada influenced the methods of insertion and expression with the surrealist group years later but in a positive sense of freedom from modern society. Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings established Dada in February 1916 in Zurich, Switzerland in a club whose name became the famed Cabaret Voltaire. Those that joined Dada shared in the hatred and disgust of World War I. One of the members, Marcel Janco recalled,

We had lost confidence in our culture. Everything had to be demolished. We would begin again after the *tabula rasa*. At the Cabaret Voltaire we began by shocking the bourgeois, demolishing his idea of art, attacking common sense, public opinion, education, institutions, museums, good taste, in short, the whole prevailing order.⁶⁶

This description of Dada's goal in attacking and demolishing the current societal structure relates, in a way, to Breton's goals for surrealism. But surrealism was not a movement that embraced dysfunction and catastrophe, rather it sought to create a

⁶⁶ Marcel Janco, "Dada at Two Speeds," in *Dadas on Art*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1971), 36.

freedom of the mind; the surrealist recognized the flaws with society and concocted ways not only in which to excite change but with which to cope with Europe's past.

The surrealist movement was, first and foremost, one of literary brilliance: it was driven initially by poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. The members of the group, artists and academics alike, wrote and published written work throughout the movement. Between March 1919 and June 1924, Breton, Aragon, and Soupault established two publications, *Littérature* and *Littérature: novella série*. They were small-format literary magazines with a majority of the writing done by its editors.⁶⁷ This rather conservative magazine was "...a site wherein the future Surrealists developed a range of theoretical resources and techniques for literary production and the critique of literary convention."⁶⁸ In 1924, a new publication titled, *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1924-1929) replaced *Littérature*; the October issue of that first year was the stage for Breton's famed 'Manifesto of Surrealism.' The 'Manifesto of Surrealism,' officially renounces Dada and defines Breton's new movement of surrealism:

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, but which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written work, or in any other matter—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.⁶⁹

In this definition of surrealism we see first the importance of the mind and its need to work automatically, without restraint. Breton believed people could think without

⁶⁷ Briony Fer, David Batchelor and Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 47-48.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁹ Irene E. Hofmann, "Documents of Dada and Surrealism: Dada and Surrealist Journals in the Mary Reynolds Collection," *The Art Institute of Chicago, Ryerson and Burnham Libraries* (2001).

restraint through a type of automatic language and writing, hypnosis, as an attempt to understand the inner-workings of the mind, almost scientifically. Through the definition Breton points out the need to abstain from reason, and disregard social constructions and pre-existing ideologies. Breton is also famously known for embracing dreams as a pathway to an alternate reality;

To Breton, the dream was the touchstone of surreality, for the surreal was like a waking dream—a fragment of real space altered, because it is created, by the desire of the dreamer, yet appears to him simultaneously as something independent of his own will, something he merely happened upon by chance.⁷⁰

The initial definition given to surrealism morphs and changes by the 1930s, when the movement turns to focus on the object and creation of visual work and its effects on thought. Unlike Breton and Dalí, Giacometti's writing in the early 1930's is not prescriptive or manifesto-like. His writing was thoughtful and introspective, reflecting on his childhood or dreams. The importance of writing and publishing does not diminish in the second iteration of surrealism after the Second Manifesto was published in 1929, but their confrontation with reason and societies' morality takes a stronger hold through the visual arts, especially through the surrealist object.

Breton called for a freedom of the imagination from contemporary rationalism and paired it with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic representation of the mind. Breton credited Freud in his First Manifesto "as having brought back to light 'that part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer,'" ⁷¹ demonstrating he felt and agreed that in the minds of men was a suppressed and forgotten realm. While completed in the 1900s and 1910s in German, Freud's writings were published in French

⁷⁰ Krauss, *Passages*, 117.

⁷¹ Fer, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism*, 182.

several years later and immediately bewitched the minds of many, including the founding surrealists with the concept of accessing the unconscious and subconscious through dreams, automatic writing, and hypnosis. The other major thinker next to Freud that clutched at the minds of the surrealists was Karl Marx. Surrealists used the ideas of Freud and Marx combined “as a means to criticize the existing social order and the dominant culture that they saw as repressive.”⁷² The combination of the social aspect of life between World War I and World War II and the psychic realm of the mind is the defining characteristic of the surrealist movement. Members of surrealism looked to mesh politics and experimental art in order to breach the unconscious of society. Breton speaks on surrealism, in an interview with André Parinaud, where they reflect upon the surrealists’ first encounters with the Communist Party. He stated,

... it’s clear to us that the world’s real torment lies in *the human condition*, even more than in *the social condition* of individual. Be that as it may, this social condition, which was totally arbitrary and iniquitous...acted as a screen between man and his true problems—a screen that we therefore needed first and foremost to pierce.⁷³

For Breton, the human condition contains a freedom of the unconscious, and the social condition is a construction that represses one’s abilities to access their unconscious desires. Breton believed these are opposing conditions, and only through ‘acts of madness’ or unexpected interruptions into the social order could one glimpse their inner selves. This idea of interruption materialized in the surrealist object and the goal to create the uncanny: the uncanny defined the encounter one has with an object, something one

⁷² Ibid., 180.

⁷³ Breton, *Conversations*, 97.

comes upon suddenly, that is out of context and because of its unfamiliar context, jolts the viewer into accessing their unconscious freely through association.

By the time Giacometti entered the group in 1930, the movement was taken in a new direction. The time from January 1929 through March 1930 in surrealism is known as the Crash of 1929.⁷⁴ During this time Breton demanded daily meetings with members at various bars and cafés around Paris, expecting them to be there precisely on time and for hours, as if being in the surrealist circle was a full-time job⁷⁵ – Breton was determined to galvanize the group toward social revolution. On March 11, 1929, he called a summit meeting to discuss the philosophical implications of Leon Trotsky’s exile from the Soviet Union a month prior. The meeting consisted of 32 participants, selected out of a larger number of 57. Breton sifted through countless names of past, current, and hopeful future surrealist participants, writing them each letters and sending questionnaires that he instructed would be discussed at the meeting. According to Polizzotti, Breton demanded to discuss each member’s moral qualifications for being at the meeting; it comes as no surprise the meeting ended in an accusatory uproar.

Shortly after this meeting, Breton published the Second Surrealist Manifesto in October 1929 in *La Révolution Surréaliste* (what would coincidentally be the last issue of the publication). In the Second Manifesto Breton reminds readers, “...Surrealism attempted to provoke, from the intellectual and moral point of view, *an attack of*

⁷⁴ Mark Polizzotti, in his in-depth biography of André Breton, describes Breton’s personal life spinning out of control: he and his wife were going through a tumultuous divorce, and his mistress was also unhappy with their relationship. The lack of control at home lead Breton to extol an even tighter grip on the members of the surrealist group than ever before, becoming a true tyrant; see Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, 311.

⁷⁵ Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, 312.

conscience, of the most general and serious kind....”⁷⁶ Generally, this second iteration consists of Breton defending his movement, citing recent criticism and attempting to justify his past actions and beliefs despite what others said or wrote about him and the surrealist movement. Breton calls out to past participants, noting their flaws and points where they did not accept surrealism, or did so poorly, and questions their moral dedication to the movement. He also reflects on his encounters with members of the Communist party, and their lack of understanding of the importance of both the social and political aspect of the surrealist mission. Polizzotti writes,

The manifesto of 1929 is, of course, more than just a long list of condemnations, and intertwined with the scathing critiques are important philosophical points, most notable concerning Surrealism’s ongoing debate with Communism over the issue of artistic freedom. ‘The problem of social action...is only one of the forms of a more general problem which Surrealism set out to deal with, and that is *the problem of human expression in all its forms*,’ Breton stressed.⁷⁷

The problem of human experience and expression is interspersed throughout. Breton is still concerned with our perception of reality, with accessing the unconscious and propelling a social and political revolution. Breton writes,

...let us not lose sight of the fact that the idea of Surrealism aims quite at the total recovery of our psychic force by a means which is nothing other than the dizzying descent into ourselves, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of other places, the perpetual excursion into the midst of forbidden territory, and that there is no real danger of its activities coming to an end so long as man still manages to distinguish an animal from a flame or stone...⁷⁸

He calls for an introverted assessment of the self; he continues to encourage the surrealists to seek new paths outside of the accepted customs of society.

⁷⁶ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 123.

⁷⁷ Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, 323.

⁷⁸ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 136-137.

The change in the group from its conception to the crash of '29 can be tracked visually through *La Révolution*. It began with simple line drawings and photography reproduction, and led to the reproduction of paintings and collages and relief sculpture. If Giacometti had access to the journal, the group's progress and transformation would have been apparent.

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