

Sex and Gender in Giacometti's Couples

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*I*n Western sculpture, the term “couple” usually expresses a relationship between two people, whether positive or negative - lust or love, rape or kidnapping, while in tribal art it is also common to place the two figures side by side as separate, independent entities. The latter approach can be seen in Giacometti's first *Couple* (Fig. 1), but since then Giacometti went on to portray many different types of couples, illustrating a wide variety of relations between men and women, ranging from alienation to extreme violence. As we shall see, the changing character of the relations appears to result from Giacometti's increasing self-awareness of his psychological and artistic motivations, and his willingness to expose them.

The most common phenomenon in Giacometti's early couples is the difficulty of distinguishing the man from the woman. Both masculine and feminine characteristics appear simultaneously in each figure, and it is only through juxtaposition that the contrast between them becomes evident. This phenomenon began in the early twenties, when Giacometti was searching for means to represent the human being independent of his own visual impressions or the figure's external appearance.

In 1921, during a visit to Italy, Giacometti first encountered the difficulty of realizing what he saw with his own eyes. The problem arose again in Paris, while he was studying with Bourdelle in the *Grand-Chaumière* Academy (1922-25). As he later wrote to Pierre Matisse (the gallery owner): ‘The form dissolved, it was little more than granules moving over a deep black void, the distance between one wing of the nose and the other is like the Sahara, without end, nothing to fix one's gaze upon, everything escapes’.¹

Giacometti traced the origin of the problem to the fact that he became lost in the mass of details and was therefore incapable of capturing the

comprehensive whole. As he added in his letter to Matisse: ‘...impossible to grasp the entire figure (we were too close to the model, and if one began on a detail, a heel, the nose, there was no hope of ever achieving the whole).’² As the presence of the model caused him to focus again and again on details, he finally decided to work from memory. I believe that this is the main reason why he began to sculpt couples: since he was not copying reality, it was thus easier to represent the different sexual identities simply by contrasting the male and the female.

This was the beginning of a ten-year period in which Giacometti sought different ways to tackle the same problem. At first he sought help in two artistic sources in particular – primitive and cubist sculptures. Neither imitates the external shapes of visual reality, but rather represents them conceptually, by reducing them to the most characteristic forms, or by the use of signs and ideograms. In the first *Couple* (Fig. 1), the sexual identification is based on signs – a kind of graphic summary of the male and female sexual organs. However, at the same time, it is already possible to detect a hint of the archetypal shapes (which would figure more prominently in later couples).

The man is constructed as a phallic upside-down cone, with what appears to be a phallus projecting from its base. Above it is the palm of a hand and to its right a bulge that could be another hand or perhaps a nose in profile. Above the hands is a concave dent that suggests a mouth, and above all these, a very large eye protrudes, resembling those of Egyptian art. In combination with the cone it endows the man with the quality of an archaic totem. The size of the eye and its prominence immediately brings to mind Giacometti’s main difficulty – how to realize what he perceived with his eyes.³

Just as the cone represents the male, the oval is a feminine archetype; it represents the woman’s fertility by creating an association with the female reproductive organs: the womb, the ovaries or the lips of the vagina. The same shape reappeared the same year in Giacometti’s *Spoon Woman*, as a concave oval that almost looks like a container. Giacometti was probably familiar with the theories of Freud, which by that time were well known in Paris, mostly to Giacometti’s Surrealist friends. Freud claims that vessels, or any containing shape, are archetypal female symbols.⁴

It should be noted that use of a spoon-shape for a figure (human or animal) is very common in African sculpture, as can be seen in the Dan spoons from Nigeria, in which the spoon represents the body and the handle is a pair of legs.⁵ *Couple* and *Spoon Woman* were the first appearance of the oval or the spoon to represent a female archetype in Giacometti’s work. Many variations of these have since been used in his couples.



Fig. 1: *Couple*, 1926, Bronze, 60X37X18 cm., Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Zurich. © ADAGP, Paris, 2000.

At the base of the first *Couple's* female oval appears a smaller horizontal oval that looks like lips, but represents the vagina.⁶ Above it are two hands, then two breasts (which look like eyes), and finally a round shape that may represent an eye, but has no resemblance to the male's; it looks more like his phallus, though much less prominent.⁷

The female's identity is determined by her sexual attributes. Each part of the female body, that is, each sexual sign, could also represent a part of her face. This replacement of facial features with sexual organs appeared later in many paintings by Magritte, such as *Rape* (1934);⁸ and indeed, portraying the woman simply as female and not as an individual, is an act of aggression, just like rape. But the most explicit fact is the lack of the female eye, replaced by an ambivalent shape that could also be interpreted as a sexual organ, and one that stands in stark contrast to the man's large and clear eye. If the eye is the window to the soul, then the woman has no soul but sex; therefore she is only a sex object.

In his continued search for a means to represent the human figure, Giacometti was not prepared to settle for such an abstract solution as that used in the first *Couple*, because he was, nevertheless, interested in realizing at least part of what his eyes could see in reality.⁹ He thus turned to Cubism: 'This yielded, after many attempts touching on Cubism, one necessarily had to touch on it (it is too long to explain now)'.¹⁰

I presume that by the word "Cubism", Giacometti did not mean any particular style in Cubism (analytical or synthetic), but rather a general conceptual language that had become a modern artistic means, and was also used by many artists who were not Cubists. Giacometti used Cubism as he used Primitivism, as a conceptual language that provided him with a formal framework. Cubism enabled him to break up the human body into its component parts, using shapes that were not copied from visual reality, and simultaneously to assemble them into a whole without getting lost in details.

In *Figures, Man and Woman* (Fig. 2), one can already see the transition in progress from African forms to Cubist forms. The break up of the forms is only partial and they are arranged in two geometric massive shapes; each figure is composed of several units which represent the different body areas (head, torso, legs).

To represent gender, Giacometti substituted the graphic sexual ideogram with archetypal shapes that evoke maleness or femaleness. Nevertheless, it is not easy to distinguish the man from the woman because each figure contains a mixture of sexual signs. Furthermore, Giacometti's lexicon of shapes is not sufficiently consistent to enable one to construct a key to his symbolism, for the same shape may appear in one work as female and in another as male.

The woman in *Figures* appears to be composed of a cylinder and a ball. The cylinder is somewhat phallic, but its side, where the stomach should be, is an oval concavity. While the concavity may represent the stomach's negative reflection (it is common in Cubism to exchange convex for concave and vice versa), it is, as already stated, also a female archetypal image. The roundness of the ball, on the top of the cylinder, also draws a comparison with the female form, though here it could simply represent the head. It is important to note that in some of Giacometti's sculptures the ball shape is also associated with the male figure, but as I have already contended, its significance, like that of the other forms, can change from one sculpture to the next.

The male appears to be the taller figure, but is also composed of ambiguous shapes that resist immediate identification: the big square shapes create a masculine association, but seen from the side, the hips portray the silhouette of a guitar, which is also conceived as a archetypal female image. The problem



Fig. 2: *Figures, Man and Woman (Personage)*, 1926-27, Bronze, 26X20X15 cm., Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Zurich. © ADAGP, Paris, 2000.

of identification is increased when we turn the supposedly male sculpture, and discover an oval concavity in it too. An additional clue for gender identification is supplied by the rod that penetrates the two figures. It is difficult to determine which is performing the act of penetration, because of the static nature of both figures and the horizontal angle of the rod. However, the supposedly male figure is taller, and the rod protrudes from lower down its anatomy, in the groin area, which suggests the male phallus. Since it emerges through a bulge in the upper part of the other figure, it suggests a female breast.

Finally, if each figure is analyzed separately, it is difficult to discern which is which; from every angle the emphasis changes and either figure can be interpreted as both male and female. Only their juxtaposition contrasts the height and massive shapes of the one, with the roundness of the other. Therefore, the only means of reaching a determinate conclusion is by viewing the couple side by side. This is thus the main reason for presenting them as a couple: not

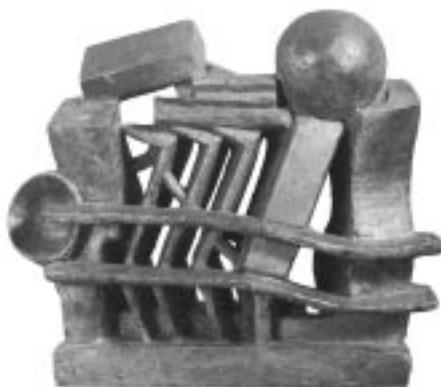


Fig. 3: *Cubist Composition 1927*, Bronze, H:63.5 cm., Private Collection, Bern. © ADAGP, Paris, 2000.

the physical or spiritual relations between the man and the woman, but the possibility of creating each of them out of abstract forms and yet still being able to distinguish the male from the female.

Another sculpture from the cubist-couples series is *Cubist Composition, Man and Woman* (Fig. 3). This was created at the time that Giacometti separated from Flora, with whom he was having a complicated love affair, while at the same time still being in love with Bianca. Bianca was a relative whom he had met in Rome (1921), but their relations were never consummated.¹¹

At that stage in his life Giacometti made a clear distinction between the pure woman and the defiled - the saint and the whore. This distinction was apparently a product of the complicated relationship he had with his mother,

whom he loved but feared; they had a special relationship, very understanding and caring, but she was also a very imposing and dominant parent. Subconsciously, he appears to have associated with his mother any woman he could love, that is a woman to whom he could relate on a spiritual level, and therefore he could not have a sexual relationship with her, which would have been almost like incest.¹²

While Bianca was the object of pure love, his relations with Flora were strictly sexual. When he became tired of her and her infidelities he left her, but when he discovered that she had another love, he became jealous.¹³ His emotional confusion - his betrayal of Bianca's pure love, his need for Flora and at the same time his recoiling from any emotional commitment - is expressed in the middle of *Cubist Composition*, which was probably done at that time.

Both figures are partly broken into many abstract fragments, which create a transparent skeleton in space. The female and male archetype signs are mixed to the extent that they can not be told apart. It is not even clear whether there is a couple or three people, because of the three half-empty balls, which probably serve as heads. The half-empty ball is also a kind of spoon, similar to the Zulu Spoon from *musée de l'homme* in Paris, in which it serves as the head of an elongated female figure.¹⁴

Two of the half-empty balls of the *Cubist Composition* are seen from the front while the third is seen from behind. The identity of the third party is not clear; it could represent a lover who is disrupting the relations between the couple, like Flora's lover. But it could also be the image of Bianca, his pure love, whose memory interfered in his relations with Flora. However, it should be noted that a third person also appears in Giacometti's *Three Figures Outdoors* (Fig. 5), as his double or alter ego.

Whatever the identity or nature of the relations between the three people in *Cubist Composition*, they are no longer alienated or stand next to each other. Their parts may be muddled in a purely mechanical way or the physical relations at least are real; the fusion of shapes here may suggest actual intercourse. The idea of sexual relations is supported by the presence of a little ball that lies inside one of the half-empty balls and could symbolize an embryo. All these shapes continued to recur in Giacometti's work: the half-empty ball as a head, or as a container representing fertility, mostly when it contains a little "embryo" ball inside.

If in *Figures* one could distinguish the sexual identity of the male and female by their juxtaposition, in *Cubist Composition* it is impossible to do so. What does this confusion of sexual signs mean? The answer is complex and lends itself to a number of interpretations. A similar phenomenon can be detected in

the work of many artists of the time, and perhaps expresses the idea that man and woman are one, or were so initially. This approach sees the human being as one entity, regardless of sexual identity. Such unification of man and woman is conceived as the ideal state, before the separation of Eve from Adam, and before the temptation of the serpent, who introduced them to knowledge, that is, to experience sex. The real banishment from the Garden of Eden is thus seen as the separation of the human whole into two incomplete entities - male and female.

The longing for reunification of the two genders is present in many religions: in the Jewish Cabala, for instance, the union between God and his female counterpart, the *Shekhinah* (the spirit), is to be preceded by the return of the male and female elements to their original union.¹⁵ In the Hindu Tantras, the male god and the female goddess are considered, together, to be the first revelation of the Absolute.¹⁶ In the Polynesian religion, unification of the two divinities, Hina the female and Taaroa the male, creates the world in the form of Fatou, their son, who endows the earth with life.¹⁷

Images combining both male and female exist in several cultures. In tribal art, for example, one can find a simultaneous duality of sexual identities in a Dogon *Seated Figure*: the same figure has both breasts and a male phallus.¹⁸ Another combined image, which appears in classical culture, is the hermaphrodite. Erich Neumann uses the term 'Hermaphroditic quality' in order to label the presence of the opposite sexual component in each gender: the female (anima) in the man, or the male (animus) in the woman.¹⁹ And indeed, considering this concept of hermaphroditism, it is possible to understand the mixing of sexual signs in Giacometti's work through the theories of Freud and Jung, who claimed that each person contains within him some components of the other sex.

However, one cannot ignore the fact that the confusion of sexual signs could hint at Giacometti's insecurity in his own sexual identity. James Lord argues that already in his youth Giacometti had feared a homosexual tendency, when he was suspected of being in love with one of his friends at his boarding school. Rumors began to spread around about the nature of their relationship (which was never consummated, and was probably no more than a normal teenage crush). Giacometti was torn between his feelings and his fear: the fear of being attracted to a member of his own sex, the fear of the strict school-ban on such relations and, most of all, the fear of confronting the issue; he therefore ran away from school.²⁰

Later on in Paris, where some of his close friends were homosexuals, there were again rumors. It is an interesting phenomenon in itself that the Surrealists

were strictly opposed to homosexuality. I assume that Freud would have found it worthy of investigation that such a revolutionary group should exhibit such a conservative prejudice, despite its supposedly liberal sexual approach.²¹

Although Giacometti was not, as far as one can tell, a homosexual, his early experiences do appear to have left their mark and contributed to his sexual problems - partial impotence and inability to relate to woman.²² In 1921, in Rome, where he met Bianca, he also discovered that whores were the ideal means for stress-free sex, and the prospect excited him: 'It's cold, it's mechanical', he exclaimed once after reaching orgasm with a whore.²³

His inability to make a total commitment may partly explain the alienation of the first *Couple*, in which the two figures stand apart, ignoring one another. This may also explain the mixing of sexual signs in the cubist couples, in which the fusion is not derived from the emotional nature of the relations, but is a product of the mechanical manipulation of shapes, which creates an artificial relation between the two figures.

Although I take a psychological approach, such as considering Giacometti's insecurity in his sexual identity, I do not intend to use psychoanalysis as a methodological tool for interpretation. It is Giacometti, rather, who himself uses psychoanalysis to hint that several of his past traumatic experiences offer the necessary key to his work. He is no mere innocent patient in the analyst's chair; but sometimes tells tales and manipulates us into interpreting his works according to Freudian theories. He also puts himself in the role of the Freudian dreamer, who does not know how to interpret the images and symbols of his own dream. However, since *we* know how to translate them, says Freud, it may happen that the sense of the dream becomes clear to us as soon as we hear its text, while it still remains an enigma to the dreamer himself.²⁴

By providing constant autobiographical details, Giacometti turns us into voyeurs, placing us next to the psychoanalyst's sofa, beside the patient (he himself). Although some interpretations may seem like Freudian clichés, Giacometti himself manipulates us into accepting them as part of the narrative of his works, and we must, therefore, include them in our discourse. Giacometti continued to use psychoanalytic manipulations to the end of his days, long after he broke with the Surrealists. This enabled him to enrich the multiplicity of meaning in his work, a multiplicity that could not, perhaps, be expressed by visual means alone. It is impossible to analyze his work without paying close attention to its verbal accompaniment.

But were all these "facts" true? Some of them were probably the fruit of his imagination but, like Jung, Giacometti realized that fantasies can carry the same weight as reality itself. Whatever the case, they shed light upon his artistic

creation, as affected by his somewhat obsessive and disturbed personality and his many compulsive habits.²⁵

Whatever the original reason for the confusion of sexual signs, it began to disappear as the influence of the Surrealists increased. Because exploration and externalization of the unconscious were so important to the Surrealists, every member of the group had to undergo a kind of group therapy, accompanied by confessions and free association exercises.²⁶ These seances helped Giacometti to express and release his suppressed sexual aggression. Consequently, he ceased mixing the sexual signs, for gender identification was essential to determine who was the aggressor (the male) and who was the cause (the female).²⁷

Giacometti often spoke of the important role that violence between the sexes played in his thoughts and dreams; in his youth, every night before going to sleep he imagined himself killing two men, and raping and murdering two women.²⁸ He always thought that between men and woman there could only be disagreement and hostility, a rivalry in which 'the woman will not surrender until her physical strength is diminished; the man has raped her'.²⁹ At one of the Surrealist meetings, he was asked to answer, among other questions: 'How were the women chosen?' to which he replied: 'You hid yourself at dusk, and as the girl passed, you threw yourself at her and raped her'.³⁰ This violence was finally released, in a very concise and abstract form, in *Couple* (Fig. 4).

The female figure in *Couple* is reminiscent of the oval *Spoon Woman*, but she is even more concave and empty of matter and in profile no more than a thin curved line. Although the concave shape is a female archetype, it could also have been influenced by the positive-negative technique of the Cubists, and thus represent the convex belly. However, in this couple, the concave shape has yet another function: to stress and enhance the recoiling movement of the female, and thus to increase the male threat of aggression.

The man resembles a taut bow and arrow. The blunt end of the arrow is slanted backwards, increasing the tension. It resembles a leg gaining momentum to pounce forward. The sharp end cuts aggressively through the space between the man and the woman, directed at the center of the concavity, where the female sexual organ appears, prominent and emphasized.³¹ It almost touches the vagina, but not quite, and the suspense is eternally preserved in a threatening freeze, just before the actual moment of penetration.³² The terror is enhanced by a zigzag effect in the upper part of the woman, resembling a spring about to jolt her body forward, towards the arrow, thus enabling the male to complete the painful and even fatal act of penetration.



Fig. 4: *Couple, Man and Woman*, 1928-29, Bronze, 40X40X16.5 cm., Musée national d'Art modern, Paris. © ADAGP, Paris, 2000.

This work not only describes fear and aggression between the sexes; it also creates them. In order to achieve this, Giacometti had to create “a state of mind”, in its Futuristic sense, through the use of force-lines. By reducing the material to a mere vector, he created a decisive movement that evokes violence. This was the first time that Giacometti realized the concept of man and woman through their relations, without the aid of gender signs or other images of external appearance.

In *Three Figures Outdoors* (Fig. 5), the subject is again a trio. The genders are very difficult to identify and describe because of their extreme linearity, but the central figure appeared to be a woman. Its zigzag shape recalls the upper part of the woman in *Couple*, but this time the form is open, comprising four linear zigzags that resemble an African decorative pattern. The woman is passive, while another figure is reaching out to her with two spear-like phallic hands, grabbing her aggressively. This aggression seems more possessive than sexual, though there is also a hint of sex and even fertility: a kind of branch grows between the man and the woman, linking them inseparably and bearing fruit shaped like breasts, or a womb with ovary.

Does this scene depict the Garden of Eden? The presence of the tree and the fruit as an image of fertility could suggest so.³³ But who is the third figure, standing apart? He seems to be another male, and not directly involved in the



Fig. 5: *Tree Figures Outdoors*, 1929, Bronze, 54X39X8.9 cm., Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. © ADAGP, Paris, 2000.

couple's relations. He too has two spear-like phallic hands but they are very short. Is it Giacometti himself, portrayed as impotent? Does the sculpture describe relations that involve three parties, as I have suggested for *Cubist Composition*? Around 1930 Giacometti was involved with Denise, who also had another lover, a man called *Dédé le Raisin*, because he sold fruit in the street (could this be related to the above tree and fruit?). Apparently the three of them got along well and, according to Lord, 'it is said that they enjoyed together the conclusive demonstrations of intimacy'.³⁴ Unfortunately, nothing is known about Denise nor are there dates or other details on the affair, and therefore no proof that the sculpture was created at the same time.

Reinhold Hohl believes that a hint to the presence of a third person can be found in Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*: Every time Miller reached orgasm he felt as though he were two people, one of whom was watching the other perform.³⁵ His description matches Giacometti's state of mind at the time: his inability to relate to women, the distinction he made between love and sex, and above all, the mechanical nature of the sexual act (which he had discovered

with the help of the Roman prostitutes). All these suggest that the two male figures are Giacometti himself: part of him is grasping the woman passionately, while the other part looks on from the outside, disengaged and alienated.

Giacometti's double fits the image of the *doppelgänger* - an apparition of a living person (not a ghost) in German folklore. Encountering one's double is a sign of approaching death, which may explain why Giacometti wrote upon a photograph taken from the plaster: *Man, Woman and Ghost*.³⁶ The theme of the "double" is also familiar in literature and probably first appeared in the tale by Hoffmann, *The Devil's Elixir*, 1815-16 (and later in Dostoyevsky's *The Double*, 1846).

Hoffmann's "Sandman" is explained by Freud, in his essay *The Uncanny* (1919), as a division, or multiplication or replacement of the self.³⁷ Freud sees the *doppelgänger* as an insurance against destruction to the ego, expressing a desire for immortality, like the act of the ancient Egyptians who duplicated the dead in sculpture or paintings. He agrees with the theory of Otto Rank, who argues that the double functions as a measure against annihilation of the self, as a denial of death. Freud relates the *doppelgänger* to the early stage of the personality, that of narcissism.³⁸ However, when the narcissism disappears, its function changes: 'From having been an assurance of immortality, he becomes the ghastly harbinger of death',³⁹ reinforcing the above explanation for the "Ghost" in Giacometti's words on the photo: *Man, Woman and Ghost*. Freud also claims that the invention of doubling has its counterpart in the language of dreams that represent castration. However, with mental maturity the double becomes an expression of the conscious: 'Inside the self grows, slowly but surely, another special entity, able to stand in opposition to the rest of the self... which fulfills the role of mental censorship and is recognized by our consciousness as Conscience'.⁴⁰

I argue that Giacometti's double neither represents his conscience, nor his mature personality. He is still in the narcissist stage, because he has neither confronted nor overcome his problems, and therefore the double represents his fear of castration, or his impotence. It should be noted that Giacometti contracted mumps in his youth (1917-18) and was left sterile for life;⁴¹ he could, at that stage, have considered his sterility as lack of virility.

The next two sculptures, both from 1929, *Reclining Woman* and *Lying Woman*, are not couple-sculptures as such, because each of them represents only a female figure. However, I contend that both women contain the man within them and therefore represent relations between the sexes.

Reclining Woman is a variation on *Spoon Woman*, with an oval body peacefully reclining. Next to the woman's head appears a phallus-like shape, which



Fig. 6: *Lying Woman (Woman Dreaming)*, 1929, Painted Bronze, 24.5X43X14 cm., Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Zurich. © ADAGP, Paris, 2000.

probably represents the male, but this time it does not disturb the balance and stability of the female's horizontal lines, nor does it break the closed line of her shape or interfere with the introverted nature of the sculpture. Perhaps because the man is present only in the woman's thoughts, and so long as there is no active sexual contact, there is no violence.

The possibility that the presence of the man exists in the woman's thoughts is strengthened in *Lying Woman (Woman Dreaming)*, (Fig. 6), primarily due to incorporation of the word "dream" in the name of the work. The name is an essential part of a Surrealist work; it endows it with a further dimension, whether supplementary or contradictory. The dream is the most important component of Surrealist theory; it is one of the main means to reach surreality, as it gives access to the unconscious.

I believe that *Lying Woman* expresses the woman's sexual fantasy and desires revealed in her dream. There is no image of an oval spoon-woman, but there is, again, a half-empty ball that probably represents the woman's head. The single empty hemisphere also indicates that there is only one figure, although the sculpture is composed of two parallel horizontal waves, viewed from the side, lying one on top of the other. The curved lines are constructed as a mirror image: the bottom wave is mostly convex while the top wave is concave. The waves simulate love-making, both because they create undulations and because

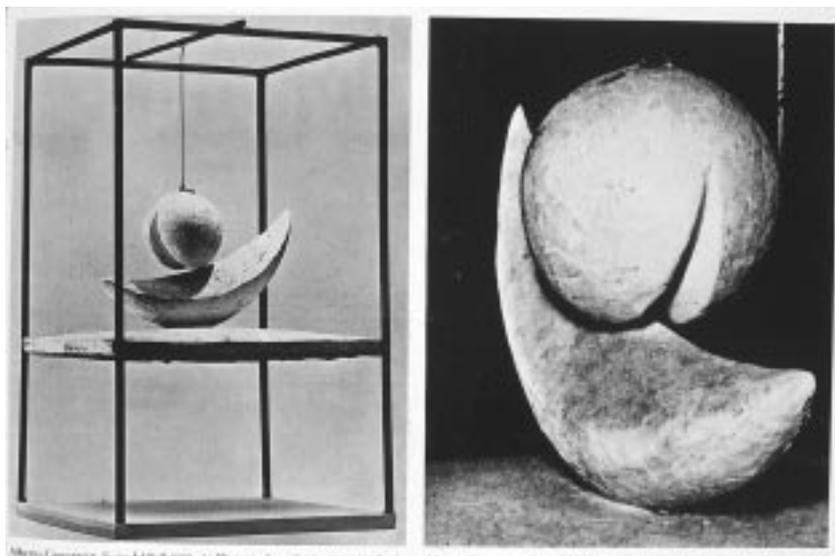


Fig. 7: *Suspended Ball*, 1930-31, Plaster and Metal, 61X36X33.5 cm., Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Zurich. © ADAGP, Paris, 2000.

of the metaphor of sea waves, which, after years of watching Hollywood movies, we have come to recognize as a subtle (or censored) symbol of sexual intercourse.

Here too, there is no male violence, for there is no real sexual contact, but only an imagined fantasy. Nevertheless, sexual activity is insinuated, and the calmness and pleasantness of the composition is undermined by three “male” comb-teeth, which penetrate the upper figure like a multiple duplication of the arrow from the 1928-29 *Couple*. Sharp comb-teeth recur in other of Giacometti’s works as masculine metaphors, but here their lack of sharpness neutralizes the threat.

Three vertical phallic shapes, together with the spoon, frame the composition like four pillars holding up the waves, or like four legs supporting a bed, on which the woman (or imaginary couple) lie, thereby further enhancing the images of sleep and dream.⁴² Overall, the sculpture elicits a sense of calmness, because of the fine balance between the horizontal wavy shapes and the vertical phallic shapes. Here again we see that when the man is present only in the woman’s thoughts, there is no violence.

In *Suspended Ball* (Fig. 7) aggression returns in full force, but in contrast to the explicit sexual violence that we witnessed in the 1928-29 *Couple*, now the violence, although similar, has become controlled and sophisticated. Giacometti

has managed here to create a synthesis between expressive means, which externalize primordial drives and instincts, and aesthetic detachment. The work not only expresses Giacometti's sexual frustrations, but it successfully realizes many of the Surrealists' ideas. Therefore, when the sculpture was first exhibited in 1930, it evoked powerful emotional responses from all who viewed it, and a particular interest among the Surrealists.⁴³

Suspended Ball is a cage that encloses and defines three-dimensional artistic space and time, within which Giacometti creates a certain situation. The need to define the space arises from the perception that existence is fluid and changing, and therefore the artist can relate to it only by framing his own artistic space.

Dora Ashton traces a shift from Surrealism to Existentialism during the 1930s, as resulting from a change in the intellectual climate at that time.⁴⁴ If in the early stage of Surrealism the focus was on a person's relations with himself - between the different levels of his consciousness - now the focus shifted towards the relations between oneself and the "Other" - people and objects that exist outside the self. The Freudian concept of duality becomes lost in a maze of possibilities; there is no longer one cause to one effect, but a multifaceted variety of circumstances that lead to a given situation, which can change in an instant if one of its components changes. The individual is conceived as part of a situation, which is composed of a network of relations between him and the "Others" (whether people or objects).

This fluid and mutable existence does not lend itself to concrete illustration, and so it becomes necessary to freeze its components in a fixed space and to enclose its duration in time in a given situation. Such an act, however, actually changes the nature of the situation, for freezing negates the essence of its inevitable fluidity.⁴⁵ The need to realize the unrealizable causes the artist to try over and over again, but at the same time it frustrates him. This frustration is transmitted to the spectator by tempting him to act, although the act is not possible. Thus, the spectator's frustration in itself concretizes the ambiguity of the situation, realizing the absurdity of existence itself.

This new existential concept was the reason for some of the characteristics that appeared in Giacometti's sculptures at that time: a space defined by a cage or a stage,⁴⁶ which contained a situation between a couple, in which the viewer was encouraged to intervene, and to experience an inevitable frustration.⁴⁷ To elicit the desired frustration these sculptures demand active participation on the part of the viewer and, therefore, the artist must create the possibility of actual movement in the sculpture. And indeed, Giacometti, who up until then had relied on the illusion of movement, claimed in his letter to

Matisse: 'I could only create such movement if it was real and actual, I also wanted to give the sensation of motion that could be induced'.⁴⁸

The cage has several functions in *Suspended Ball*: not only does it enclose space and freeze a situation, but it provides a construction, like a bridge, from which the ball hangs in mid-air by a thin string, like a mobile. The outlines of the cage also provide a frame of reference that accentuates the movement of the ball, which could otherwise be lost in an open space. Beneath the ball lies a phallic image in the shape of a crescent, which can only be a male symbol, especially since its sharp edge fits exactly into the feminine groove in the ball. The perfect fit, together with the possibility of moving the ball, tempts the viewer to insert the crescent into the slit of the ball. Thus this act becomes a reenactment of the initial aggression of the ball, and in fact constitutes the violent act itself, since it can only occur if someone activates the sculpture. However, the length of string does not permit contact, a fact that the viewer can not know that until he/she actually tries it out. The frustration that the viewer experiences stimulates a repeated attempt, and so on. Being part of the situation, the viewer comprehends its complexity and absurdity. Thus *Suspended Ball* not only presents the relationships between the sexes, but it also becomes an existential symbol of the absurdity of human existence.

There has been some discussion about the gender of the ball in this work. Hohl sees Giacometti's balls in general as a male metaphor,⁴⁹ while Hal Foster claims that the sexual reference in this work is indeterminate and that neither form (ball or crescent) is exclusively masculine or feminine, active or passive.⁵⁰ I contend, however, that there can be no gender ambivalence in this sculpture, or it will not transmit the intended essence of violence. As I have claimed earlier, at this stage of Giacometti's work the identity of the sexes is essential in order to determine who is the aggressor. I also reject the idea that there is no definition of the active or passive party. The active element (the ball) must be clear, or it would not tempt the viewer to activate it. Yet, I admit that the nature of its activity could raise a problem, since in most of Giacometti's work the active part is the male. However, in this work the ball is not really active, but is manipulated by an outsider, a kind of *Deus ex Machina*, which moves the ball like a mobile. This may suggest an image of a passive female, pushed towards the hiding male who is waiting to rape her - a paraphrase of Giacometti's own words.

Whether the ball is active or manipulated, I argue that in this work it is a clear feminine image. First, let us not forget that a ball in French is feminine (*une boule*)! Second, at the base of the ball is a slit resembling the female sexual organ *in situ*, an association that was also very clear to Dalí: 'a wooden ball (*une boule*) stamped with a feminine groove'.⁵¹

In his essay *Objets surréalistes* Dalí sums up the phases undergone by the Surrealist object. These are, I believe, relevant to the development of Giacometti's couples:

1. 'The object exists outside us, without our taking a part in it (anthropomorphic articles)'. This phase fits the early alienated couples of Giacometti, influenced by primitivism and cubism.

2. 'The object assumes the immovable shape of desire and acts upon our contemplation (dream state articles)'. This phase fits his early Surrealist influence - the violent couples and also the reclining and dreaming women.

3. 'The object is movable and such that it can be acted upon (articles operating symbolically)'.

4. 'The object tends to bring about our fusion with it and makes us pursue the formation of unity with it (hunger for an article and edible articles)'.⁵² The last two phases fit *Suspended Ball* and other movable objects that Giacometti created at that time. Thus *Suspended Ball* can be seen as the most accomplished Surrealist object but, at the same time, one of Giacometti's first existential works.

The violence between male and female disappeared from Giacometti's work as he completed his process of self-examination that had begun with the Surrealist influence. Up until then both female and male were kept captive in their gender role, and joining them together as a couple shifted the focus to the sexual character of their identity or their relations. However, during the 1930s he began to feel that he had exhausted the possibilities within the framework of Surrealism, and he left the group. From then on, Giacometti ceased to portray couples. Men and woman no longer appeared as male and female, but as human beings, whatever their gender, concerned with existential problems, and expressing the isolation and alienation of human existence.

Notes

1. Giacometti 1947: 18.
2. *Ibid.*: 16.
3. The eye plays a very important role in Surrealist thinking; in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* (1928) Breton declares: 'The eye exists in the savage stage'. Pierre 1955: 76-83. In the same year Dalí and Buñuel began their film, *Un Chien Andalou*, with a scene of a razor slicing an eye, and George Bataille published his book *L'histoire de l'oeil*. See Krauss 1985 (The Originality): 62-62, a comparison between Bataille's book and Giacometti's *Suspended Ball*. It should be noted that in "The uncanny" (Freud 1919) Freud claims that the fear of losing sight expresses the fear of castration.

The connection between eye, sexual identity and fear of castration appears in many Surrealist works.

4. Both Freud and Jung compare vessels with the uterus, see Freud 1900: 471; Jung 1990: 203. For elaboration on the vessels as Jungian archetype, see Neumann 1955: 39, 120-146. The same year in which the first *Couple* and *Spoon Woman* were made, 1926, was Freud's 70th birthday and to celebrate it many articles discussing his theories were published all over the world.
5. For instance: *Spoon, Dan, Liberia, Wood, H: 48 cm*, The Metropolitan Museum, New York, and *Spoon, Dan, Ivory Coast or Liberia, H: 52.1 cm*, Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington.
6. On the comparison between mouth and vagina, see in Belton 1987: 10; Walker 1983: 1034-1037. A similar vagina-mouth shape appears in Picasso's work, especially in the studio paintings of 1927-1928. An elaboration on the subject is to be published in my article "Surrealism's Praying Mantis and Castrating Woman", Markus, 2000.
7. Here again we may see the sexual connotation of the eye, and its connection to sexual identity and fear of castration.
8. For a comprehensive analysis of Magritte's *The Rape* (1934), see Gubar 1987: 715-729.
9. Giacometti 1947: 18: 'Since I wanted nevertheless to realize a little of what I saw...'
10. *Ibid.*
11. Lord 1986: 45, 47, 94-97.
12. For instance: on his special relations with his mother, *ibid.*: 12; on the ambivalent feeling for woman, *ibid.*: 77-78; on his impotence, *ibid.*: 78. Their special relations are clearly perceived in a family photograph from 1909: Giacometti and his mother look at each other over the heads of the other members of the family, *ibid.* (opp. p. 176).
13. *Ibid.*: 106-107.
14. *Spoon, Zulu, South Africa, Wood, H:57 cm*, Musée de l'homme, Paris. This spoon was probably familiar to many artists who visited the museum, which could explain the similarity between the Zulu spoon and some of Picasso's wood figures from the 1930s (272-282 in the catalogue of Picasso's Museum in Paris).
15. Most of my references are in Hebrew, for example Michal Peled "God and his Wife", *Ha'arez* (26.8.96) 27-76. However, this subject is also mentioned (in another context) in Belton 1988: 55.
16. Tantras is a comprehensive name for theological texts, myths and ceremonies of a number of sects in the Hindu and Buddhist religions. The writings of one of its sections, the Sakata Tantras, which apparently began in the 7th century, deals in length with the female divinity as the embodiment of creative power and godly energy. According to them, Shiva, without Shakti, is merely a lifeless body
17. Gauguin 1989: 254-256.
18. *Seated Figure, Dogon, Mali, Wood, H: 69 cm.*, Private collection (formerly in the collection of the sculptor Jacob Epstein).
19. Neumann 1955: 24-25.
20. Lord 1986: 31-32.
21. *Ibid.*: 125-126.
22. *Ibid.*: 77-78. There are many other sources concerning Giacometti's complexes and

- inclinations, including texts by Gicaometti himself, but to simplify the matter I prefer to use Lord, who has already collected and translated most of the sources.
23. *Ibid.*: 47-48.
 24. Freud 1932: 41. It should be noted that this source could also be used for the interpretation of Giacometti's *The Palace at 4 a.m.*
 25. There are many examples of his compulsive and obsessive behavior, for example Lord 1986: 14. The same could be said about his brother Diego (*Ibid.*: 16-17), which suggests that there was something wrong with their supposedly ideal family relationship.
 26. Alexandrian 1975: 49; Ades 1983: 123.
 27. In Giacometti's couple the female is not a victim, but the cause of the violence. For elaboration on the subject, including an analysis of two other violent sculptures: *Unpleasant Object* (1931) and *Woman with a Cut Throat* (1932), see Markus 2000.
 28. Lord 1986: 15, 77; Giacometti 1933: 44-45. It should be noted that in 1958 Giacometti erased the last paragraph in this text, which describes the rape, see Giacometti 1995: 9. More about Giacometti's sexual aggression, see Giacometti 1945: 3 and in many other examples in Dupin 1962.
 29. Lord 1986: 77.
 30. Hohl 1972: 251. See also Giacometti 1995: 14. The connection between eroticism and violence was a very common idea among the Surrealists, and was mainly developed by George Bataille, who claims: 'De l'érotisme, il est possible de dire qu'il est l'approbation de la vie jusque dans la mort', Bataille 1957: 17. For an elaboration on the subject, see Markus, 2000.
 31. A similar shape of an emphasized vagina inside an empty oval appears in his destroyed plaster *Woman* (1926-27), see Krauss 1984: 528.
 32. This always reminds me of the tension between the fingers of God and Adam in Michelangelo's *Creation of Man* (1508-12) in the Sistine Chapel, mainly because of the contrast between the meanings of the two works - creation by a potentially spiritual idea versus intercourse by a potentially violent sexual act.
 33. Another work by Giacometti, *Woman, Head, Tree* (1930) is interpreted by Hohl as the story of Eden, Hohl 1972: 81.
 34. Lord 1986: 125-126.
 35. Hohl 1972: 81.
 36. Giacometti 1988: 86.
 37. Freud 1919. See also Krauss (*Corpus Delicti*) 1985: 82; 85.
 38. *Ibid.* (Freud): 234-241.
 39. *Ibid.*
 40. *Ibid.*
 41. Lord 1986: 29.
 42. It should be noted that the French word for lying – *couchée* – also has a sexual connotation.
 43. Upon seeing the sculpture, Breton invited Giacometti to join the Surrealist group (Lord 1986: 118). Dalí was very impressed and claimed that *Suspended Ball* introduced all the essential principles of the definition of the Surrealist object (Finkelstein 1993: 119). In fact, Dalí wrote his essay on the Surrealist object, *L'objets surrealistes*, (Dalí

- 1931) after he had seen *Suspended Ball* in the exhibition. See also Krauss 1984: 512; 529, n. 33 and Krauss 1985: 57.
44. Ashton 1971: 89-95.
 45. Artists' inability to determine a situation that, by nature, is constantly mobile and changing is similar to the problem posed by quantum mechanics: scientists' inability to conduct an accurate objective experiment, as the same experiment necessarily interferes with and influences the results (Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, 1927).
 46. It should be noted that Giacometti also defines the space of his drawings and paintings by a linear frame.
 47. Sometimes Giacometti introduces a third figure, such as a lover or his alter ego. In *Man, Woman and Child* (1931) the third party is a child, whose presence immediately turns the couple into parents. Although the latter can also be considered as a couple, it involves a new theme in Giacometti's sculptures: the Oedipal phase, on which I can not elaborate in the frame of this article.
 48. Giacometti 1947: 20.
 49. Hohl 1972: 81. Hohl refers to other sculptures as evidence but, as I have claimed before, Giacometti changes the metaphors from one sculpture to another, and so their significance can not be inferred except within the context of the specific sculpture at hand.
 50. Foster 1991: 49. Foster is referring to the fact that *Suspended Ball* appears as one of Giacometti's drawings under the title "Objets mobiles et muets" (movable and silent objects) in *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* 3 (1931). On the ambivalent identity of the genders in this work, see also Krauss 1985: 62-64.
 51. Finkelstein 1993: 119.
 52. Chipp 1975: 426-27.

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