# MOVED BY THE IMMOBILE

## A Phenomenological Study of the Moving Presence of Works in Alberto Giacometti's Mature Period (1945–1966)

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The impetus of this thesis lies in the moving presence of the art of twentieth-century modern artist Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), understood in the literal and figurative senses of the word "movement." Its focus is on the way Giacometti's inanimate works animate their viewers—stirring, moving, and inviting them to move through, around, and alongside his works. In this way, I liken the moving presence of Giacometti's art to the presence of a human before us. Aided by the insights of twentieth-century philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, readers will be moved to their own phenomenological experiences of Giacometti's work. Formal studies will reveal the palpable relationships between stillness and movement as well as distance and proximity within Giacometti's works' texture, scale, and finally, his artistic process. Drawing upon both formal analysis and phenomenological aesthetic theory, I argue that Giacometti's lifelong struggle to find an ending point to his works was his primary strength, in allowing his viewers to finish the works with their own eyes.

### I. Preface

Throughout the thesis, the phenomenological theories of twentieth-century philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) provide further lines of insight into Giacometti's work, with a focus on his mature sculptural period of spare, elongated figures from 1945 to his passing in 1966. Phenomenology is a philosophical tradition that was shaped in the early twentieth century by philosophers including Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre and others. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy provides a helpful definition, explaining that "phenomenology is the study of 'phenomena': appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience."[1] Thus, phenomenology as a discipline stresses the importance of conscious experience from the subjective or first person point of view as chiefly formative of our understanding of the world. The last in his trio of philosophical aesthetics essays and the last work he saw published in his lifetime, Merleau-Ponty's essay "Eye and Mind" provides a particularly helpful lens into how Giacometti's sculptures encourage viewing not as a passive act, but an actively embodied endeavor conducted by one's body as "an intertwining of vision and movement."[2] Further theoretical grounding for "Eye and Mind" can be found in Merleau-Ponty's important books, *Phenomenology of*

1 David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, summer 2018 ed. (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/.

2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Northwestern University Press, 1993), 123.

**Figure 1.** Alberto Giacometti, *Le Chat (The Cat)*, 1951, bronze, 10.19 x 31.77 x 5.27 in.

**Figure 2.** Alberto Giacometti, Edgar Kaufmann's crypt doors, bronze bas-relief, for Kaufmann's Fallingwater estate.

*Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*.[3,4] In the following pages, this thesis will explore the relationships between stillness and movement as well as distance and proximity through formal studies of Giacometti's works' texture, scale, and finally, his artistic process.

My analysis of the works will privilege, when possible, the works I saw at the Institut Giacometti during a study abroad trip in Paris in the summer of 2023 in order to provide a first-hand account of the phenomenological experience of seeing Giacometti's works. I will argue that only through one's personal interaction with the works in space can one fully experience the sensation of being moved by Giacometti's sculptures, literally and figuratively. I wish that all readers may have the chance to do the same. For, as I will argue, Giacometti's lifelong struggle to bring a person into visibility is completed by his viewers. Giacometti was not principally devoted to portraying likenesses of his subjects, but rather the act of vision itself. As expected, he felt that he could never exhaust all visions of his subjects, and thus that it was impossible to ever finish a portrait.[5] Yet, as I will argue, Giacometti devoted himself to a practice of creating works whose very ambiguity became their strength. The ambiguity of Giacometti's "unfinished" works draws inquisitive viewers in closer, inviting them to participate in the act of bringing forth his figures' subjects through their active observations and movements through his figures' surfaces, depths, and expressions. In the end, I will posit that Giacometti's lifelong struggle to find an ending point to his works was his unseen triumph, in allowing his viewers to finish the works with their own eyes.

## II. Institut Giacometti

A semblance of a cat runs by, followed by the vestiges of a dog, both so emaciated one wonders if their owner has ever fed them (Fig. 1). Bronze protrusions reach out from the relief of the Kaufmann crypt doors—two trees and two figures between them facing one another, vying to step back into the realm of the living (Fig. 2). The studio, as expected, is cluttered; its walls are covered with carved etchings and loose charcoal drawings that appear like formations arising out of ash (Fig. 3). From the ghostly charcoal ashes on the wall emerge their embodiments in plaster—gracile, spindly sculptures of whom the director of the Institut Catherine Grenier shares "are so fragile that they tremble when you walk by them."[6]

In many sculptures, the plaster has withered away over time, showing through to the threadbare wire armature skeletons beneath. The plaster figures scale towards the sky, as though reaching to escape the subterranean

3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Routledge, 2013).
4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Northwestern University Press, 1968).
5 James Lord, *A Giacometti Portrait* (Museum of Modern Art, 1965), 9, 17.
6 Nazanin Lankarani, "A Safe Haven for Giacometti's Restored Studio," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/12/arts/alberto-giacometti-francis-bacon-basel.html.

**Figure 3.** Alberto Giacometti's preserved studio, Institut Giacometti, Paris, July 2, 2023.

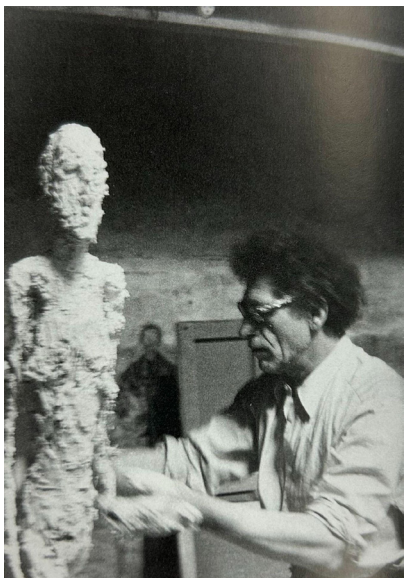


**Figure 4.** Alberto Giacometti works on a large figure for the New York Chase Manhattan project, c. 1959. Photograph by Ernst Scheidegger.

**Figure 5.** Alberto Giacometti working on plaster models, c. 1960. Photograph by Ernst Scheidegger.

space, while their slab-like pedestals ground them solidly back to the floor (Fig. 3). The original components of Giacometti's studio are all there as carefully preserved by his wife Annette; yet, the floor is too clean, the tools are too neatly arranged on the desk, and the assemblage of the studio is far too poised and bathed in artificial light. The mood is tranquil, solemn, almost clinical, as though we are scientists looking in at a test subject's hamster cage. What is missing is the fervor, the artist pacing in his studio through clouds of plaster smoke, unable to tear himself away from his many works in progress and at the same time "naturally delay[ing] as long as possible the decisive act of beginning," as American writer James Lord observed in 1964 while waiting to sit for his portrait (Fig. 4–5).[7] We follow his footprints and the molds of his restless hands, but their touch has since gone cold.

This space, suffused with the memory of Alberto Giacometti, is the Institut Giacometti in Paris. An art deco private mansion and former studio of artist and interior designer Paul Follot, the Institut Giacometti recently opened its doors in June 2018 in the same Montparnasse neighborhood where Giacometti lived and worked. Alberto Giacometti, born on October 10th, 1901, was a Swiss sculptor hailing from Borgonovo, Switzerland in the Val Bregaglia alpine valley, just a few kilometers from the Swiss-Italian border. He spent a significant amount of his childhood in the studio of his father, Giovanni Giacometti (1868–1933), who was an impressionist painter

7 Lord, *A Giacometti Portrait*, 16.

**Figure 6.** Alberto Giacometti, *Still Life with Apples*, c. 1915, oil on cardboard, 14.25 x 14.40 in., Fondation Giacometti, Paris.

**Figure 7.** Alberto Giacometti, *Tête de Diego (Head of Diego)*, c. 1914, plasticine, 10.4 x 4.5 x 5.3 in., Kunsthaus Zürich.

esteemed by Swiss collectors and artists. It was in his father's studio that at only thirteen or fourteen years old, Alberto Giacometti created his first oil painting, *Still Life with Apples* (c. 1915), and his first sculpted bust of many to come of his brother, *Tête de Diego (Head of Diego)* (c. 1914) (Fig. 6–7).

Although he would return to Borgonovo in the summers, Giacometti left for Paris in 1922 to study at the Académie de la Grande-Chaumière where he attended classes given by the sculptor Antoine Bourdelle and eventually found his own home studio at 46 rue Hippolyte-Maindron in the Montparnasse neighborhood of the 14th arrondissement. It was here where Giacometti descended into one of the lower level's rooms that was befitted only with a small window raised just above Giacometti's direct sightline when standing. Being in the studio thus evoked a feeling of being in a semi-basement, sinking into the ground, engulfed in the deep shadow his mother recalled he had favored about Val Bregaglia's long winter. The studio, which "he took on a whim and stayed in for the rest of his life," soon came to shape the bounds and character of his practice.[8] Looking around his studio of only twenty-four square meters with an American journalist near the end of his career, Giacometti admitted, "I planned on moving as soon as I could because it was too small—just a hole. But the longer I stayed, the bigger it grew. . . . I was able to do whatever I wanted here."[9] For more than thirty years of his life before his passing at sixty-four years old, Giacometti resided at this studio. For many on the outside, it appears as a dismal confinement, with no space to separate work from life or one step from another, for that matter. But for Giacometti, it was a kind of sanctuary, a room he eventually came to see to be "as vast as the world," and as "all [he] need[ed] to live in," as he told his longtime friend and British art critic David Sylvester in a 1965 interview.[10] Despite the studio's common mythologizing as a prison bereft of warmth, for Alberto, his brother Diego, and his wife Annette, 46 rue Hippolyte-Maindron was a home as familial as any, where at times they could be seen playfully flying down the stairs to meet the many guests—curators, buyers, friends—who frequented the residence, and at other times, tucked away working odd hours in solitude (Fig. 8).

Within the confines of the studio's twenty-four square feet, Giacometti set vast ambitions for himself. In the mid-1930s he would begin again, as he had originally begun in 1914 with his brother Diego's head, with a bust from life. This goal seemed small and antiquated to some, even causing surrealism's founder André Breton to spew disapprovingly, "A head? Everyone knows what a head is!"[11,12] Breton saw Giacometti's return to such

8 Michael Peppiatt, *In Giacometti's Studio* (Yale University Press, 2010), 61.
9 Peppiatt, *In Giacometti's Studio*, 61.
10 David Sylvester, *Looking at Giacometti* (Holt Paperbacks, 1997), 132.
11 Joanna Marie Fiduccia, "Hollow Man: Alberto Giacometti and the Crisis of the Monument, 1935–45" (PhD diss., UCLA, 2017), 38, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4385644j.
12 Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'âge* (French and European Publications Inc., 1986), 632.

**Figure 8.** Alberto and Annette Giacometti on the stairway in the alleyway to the studio, c. 1946. Photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson.

traditional practices as working from life as antithetical to the radical pursuits of surrealism in working from the unconscious, dreams, and psychic automatism, and subsequently dismissed him in 1935 from the Parisian surrealist group of which he had been acquainted with for the past five years. Giacometti, who was haunted "all during the surrealist period . . . by the realization that sooner or later [he] would have to go back to nature," took this dismissal in stride.[13] Years later, he was still engrossed in "exactly the same concern" as with Diego's 1914 head and perpetually "confined to the heads."[14] For it seems that all had to start from the heads for Giacometti if there would be any hope of anything else. He stated, "If we 'had' a head, we would have the rest; if we don't have a head, we have nothing, at least in my view."[15] However, it was not *just* a head Giacometti was after. Rather it was something far more elusive: "to copy exactly, as in 1914, appearance."[16]

## III. The phenomenological experience of Giacometti's works

Appearance was not exactly copying from nature, but it was no less of an impossible task. Giacometti found as early as the 1930s that "[i]t was not important anymore to make a figure exteriorly lifelike, but to live and to realize what moved [him] within."[17] Appearances to Giacometti were thus not primarily focused on the general illusionism of a subject's external appearance but on how they made themselves known internally within their viewer. Giacometti considered the ability to see truthfully in an effort to uncover an appearance as a great accomplishment in itself. A friend and admirer of Giacometti's, Merleau-Ponty sparingly cites Giacometti in his last aesthetics essay, "Eye and Mind," as "saying energetically, 'What interests me in all paintings is likeness—that is, what likeness is for me: something that makes me uncover the external world a little.'"[18] Appearances and likenesses were thus not readily available on the surface of things. Instead, they required extended sittings with the subjects to allow their likenesses to emerge from within, as though their internal qualities emanated from within to animate the external surfaces one could observe.

Giacometti's sculptures often give testimony to where their creator's sight rested upon one detail or another. As the close looker Giacometti himself suggests, one could spend forever just viewing the details within

13 Lord, *A Giacometti Portrait*, 59.
14 Angel González, *Alberto Giacometti: Works, Writings, Interviews* (Polígrafa, 2006), 146.
15 González, *Alberto Giacometti*, 146.
16 González, *Alberto Giacometti*, 146.
17 Alberto Giacometti, "Letter to Pierre Matisse," in *Exhibition of Sculptures, Paintings, Drawings [by Alberto Giacometti]: Introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre and a Letter from Alberto Giacometti: January 19 to February 14, 1948* (The Gallery, 1948), 42.
18 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 126.

**Figure 9.** Alberto Giacometti, *Bust of Diego (Flathead)*, 1955, cast 1955–1956, bronze, 21.73 x 12.48 x 5.74 in., edition number 3/6, Susse Fondeur, private collection.

one detail, such as the nose, for "the distance between one side of the nose and the other is like the Sahara. There is no fixed point, no limitation of view, everything escapes."[19] In fact, in a particular *Bust of Diego* (1955) known as *Flathead*, Giacometti appears to bring this observation into tangibility, focusing so much on the distance between one side of the nose and the other that all the volume to the sides of the face becomes severely flattened, deferring attention to the strongly defined bridge of the nose (Fig. 9). We could spend an infinite amount of time refining that bridge of the nose for it to resemble the infinite possible viewpoints of it as they present in our vision. Still, we would have no hope of arriving at the whole figure in the process. What Giacometti's works represent, in their refusal to smooth out a definitive answer to the likenesses of any particular part of the figure, including even the *Flathead*'s nose, is the experience of viewing a person, where one quickly finds themself lost between trying to grasp the subject's whole and their details concurrently.

Giacometti's works visually demonstrate what we often obscure through our incessant oscillations through the objects in our vision: that perception is usually partial and that the detail frequently comes to obscure the whole. Our fields of vision only allow for us to truly focus upon one thing at a time, condemned to make up for our eyes' singular focus by moving through and around a figure to progressively account for each detail and attempt to oscillate between them in order to produce some semblance of their combined presence. Giacometti's works are thus intended as a lived account of how he was moved by his subjects at the time of their portraits, both in the movements of his lines of sight and in his registers of feeling, as the experiences allowed him to approach a new unveiling of the outside world before him. When we view Giacometti's work, we can hope to see and feel how he was moved before the subject, to find formal traces and indexes of his and our own emergent physical and emotional responses rendered in plaster. It is in this way that Giacometti's sculptures consist of a *phenomenological* account of his viewing of the world, as an account of appearances as they happened in Giacometti's personal experience, and as they make themselves be re-experienced and remade again in an onlooker's own phenomenological experience. The work does not aspire towards surface-level realism but instead reflects the feeling of experiencing a subject coming into visibility before you, or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the experience of recognizing that as "visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things" in the shared fabric or "flesh" of the world.[20] The works not only emphasize the subjectivities in the act of seeing itself, but also raise attention to one's phenomenological experience of the sculptures coming into view, where we may rest upon a bridge of a nose, for example, longer than we spend on other aspects of the face. Giacometti's sculptures are intended to express how a figure appears from within the viewer, bringing into the visual field or flesh of the world the internal operations of sight and

19 Giacometti, "Letter to Pierre Matisse," 42.

20 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 125.

feeling in his subjective phenomenological experience. As Merleau-Ponty describes, "The painter's role is to circumscribe and project what is making itself seen within himself."[21]

Merleau-Ponty's phrasing implies an active quality in the subjects we look at, transforming them from a passive object to an active subject, who acts upon us and makes themself appear in one's painting or sculpture. Merleau-Ponty was one of the most insistent phenomenologists to grant the agency of vision to all objects around us, bringing out the idea of the seer and the seen as interchangeable roles in all objects. Merleau-Ponty believed that, in a sense, all objects were imbued with vision, deriving from the realization that "that which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking."[22] Noting this quality about ourselves, one can imagine how the other side, the object of our looking, looks at us. It is for this reason Merleau-Ponty stated, "Inevitably the roles between the painter and the visible switch. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them."[23] In this sense, Giacometti's sculptures aspire to bring to the surface an outward projection of the subjective movements within himself rather than an animation of the objective, scientific likenesses of the exterior world. As Merleau-Ponty explains in his essay "Eye and Mind," "It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings...that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement."[24] In this sense, curiously, we find the portraits done by Giacometti to be more like portraits of himself, in their materialization of his visible and mobile experience of the world, than of the subjects he depicts.

Walking around Giacometti's spindly, gracile figures, such as *Grande Femme IV (Tall Woman IV)* (1960–1961), that took center stage at the Institut Giacometti in Paris, France upon my visit in July 2023, I found myself engrossed in each pinch and prod and grasp at the now cast bronze (from the original clay, then plaster molds) as though each imprint was an attempt by Giacometti to record his evolving impressions of the model before him. Giacometti most often modeled his works in plaster, for it was a material "he scarcely fe[lt] at the ends of his fingers," and thus allowed for the least mediation between his feeling and its formation.[25] Traversing through the infinitude of rocky protrusions and angular facades on the figure, I searched for the trail guide to what he sought to communicate; however, he seemed to have set through the figure in great haste, leaving many drips of plaster and haphazard blobs all over it. I strained to find the eyes of the *Tall Woman IV* in the labyrinth of the figure's topographic landscape, but it continually evaded me, as though it did not want me to know it was looking back at me as I looked at it.

The impetus, therefore, rests on the viewer to revel in the simple act of seeing itself, allowing "the eye to inhabit as one lives in one's house," unguarded and open.[26] One must suspend prefigured assumptions in the scientifically analytic eye and relinquish control to allow Giacometti's work to approach them, allowing the work to move them through, around, and alongside itself as it sees fit. Giacometti's works are best understood and celebrated through a phenomenological viewing because of their distinct ambiguity and thus their resistance to a clear, scientific view of how reality should look. As Merleau-Ponty advocated for in his essay "Eye and Mind," "a scientific thinking, a thinking which looks on from above," as though to declare all that can be seen, "must return to the 'there is' which precedes it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and humanly modified world such as it is in our lives and for our bodies."[27] Notably, Merleau-Ponty's phrase "'there is' which precedes it" has in the background the often-attributed founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl's call to go "back to the 'things themselves,'" where one must let "what shows itself be seen from itself," according to another phenomenologist Martin Heidegger.[28,29] By this, we alone are not meant to decide for a thing, such as one of Giacometti's figures,

21 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 129.
22 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 124.
23 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 129.
24 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 123.
25 Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Search for the Absolute," in *Exhibition of Sculptures, Paintings, Drawings [by Alberto Giacometti]: Introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre and a Letter from Alberto Giacometti: January 19 to February 14, 1948*, by Alberto Giacometti (The Gallery, 1948), 5.
26 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 127.
27 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 122.
28 Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations, Vol. 1*, trans. J. N. Findlay (Routledge, 1970), 168.
29 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (State University of New York Press, 1996), 30.

what it is. Instead, the phenomenologists suggest that we suspend prefigured judgments or assumptions—including even common names, anatomical forms, and conventional understandings of a figure—to allow the thing to reveal its identity by itself, as emanating from deep within it. A step further into the real world than imagination, what Merleau-Ponty suggests, as a phenomenological contemporary of Husserl and Heidegger, is to allow what is already there to make itself seen before us—to unveil that elusive appearance of things Giacometti spent long hours after, once the skin has been broken and a truth of appearance can make itself known. As I will show in the following pages, the formal qualities of Giacometti's work further invite a visceral phenomenological experience for viewers alike, allowing onlookers to trace his movements through the material in efforts to raise the similar workings of moving visions and feelings that Giacometti once had before the original subjects and to continue his forever unfinished act of sight.

**IV. Stillness and movement**

Giacometti's full body figures from his mature period of the late 1940s until his death are all surface and negligible mass. Where there is mass, in the head, the chest, the bottom, and the outsized feet, it appears to exist only by the necessity of rendering the human form just legible, such that the viewer's attention returns to the surface texture through which the form is modeled. Giacometti explained, "I never regarded my figures as a compact mass, but as transparent constructions. It was not the outward form of human beings which interested me, but the effect they have had on my inner life."[30] Giacometti had the "sense that a sculpture's internal inert matter was at odds with the vitality he wished to convey. His solution was to eliminate that superfluous filling, thus reducing the figure's mass."[31] The surface is all that we can truly see of a person from afar, but through it, we are supposed to be able to grasp one's life force within—to affirm that one is genuinely breathing beneath their surface.

Giacometti found a way to bring life to the surface of his sculptures: to imbue the impenetrable surface with a texture of movement. In this way, Giacometti's surfaces are not meant to portray the smooth envelopes of skin we often see in an Aristide Maillol or Henry Moore, as though embalming a solid essence of vitality hidden deep inside. Instead, as Merleau-Ponty describes, Giacometti's pursuit was in "breaking the 'skin of things' to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world."[32] Giacometti's figures show their vitality on their very surface, with only enough mass to provide a foundation for this surface. Giacometti's surfaces, with their bulging clumps and crannies of clay, then plaster, and finally cast bronze, swell and rest like the emerging breath, the flitting eye, and the thousands of mysterious muscles within the face which allow for the jerk of a smile or the crinkling of the nose. As Giacometti's models sat for him, for hours and days of sessions on end, focused on staying as still, motionless, and breathless as possible, their pulse nevertheless prevailed, ringing through their bodies, with their internal heartbeats and rhythms of the living bubbling up to the surface. Giacometti's sculptures' complex textural surfaces attempt to index as many of these slight movements that lie beneath the surface outline of the human figure as possible—the movements that remind us of the vitality coursing within.

This vitality is found also in his drawings, which appear to be imbued with the vibrating line. A 1961 lithograph of Giacometti's, *Untitled (Sitting Nude Woman)* resembling his late mistress Caroline, that has hung in my room all semester, borrowed from the UC Berkeley library, is an exemplar of the movement imbued in the work of Giacometti from its very start in its initial draftsmanship (Fig. 10). Giacometti's quick lines, in variations of width, curve, and length, repeatedly encircle the woman. His careful balance between line and emptiness allows the eye to move through the many outlines, creating a sense of vibration between them, as the eye wavers between which to settle upon as the definitive outline. In a sense, "each subsequent inflection [of a line has] a diacritical value [that is] another aspect of the line's relationship to itself," in such a way that it is impossible to put down another line, as artist Paul Cézanne said, without changing the whole picture.[33]

30 Carola Giedion-Welcker, *Contemporary Sculpture: An Evolution in Volume and Space. Selective Bibliography by Bernard Karpel: Modern Art and Sculpture* (G. Wittenborn, 1955), 94.

31 Paul Moorhouse, *Giacometti: Pure Presence* (National Portrait Gallery, 2015), 140.

32 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 141.

33 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 60.

**Figure 10.** Alberto Giacometti, *Untitled (Sitting Nude Woman)*, 1961, crayon lithograph, 17 x 21 in., from *Derrière le Miroir*, no. 127, Graphic Arts Loan Collection at University of California, Berkeley.

The *Sitting Nude Woman*'s left eye, slightly closer to the viewer, is depicted as far wider than the right and appears to rustle in its deep cavity of shadow, as though its pupil is caught between looks. The left side of her mouth is decidedly downturned in a frown; however, the right side is more inscrutable, first straying down towards the chin before flicking upwards with the slightest vertical tick mark. There she sits in the nude, one leg over the other with her hands tucked in their overlap, likely shifting naturally in the cold stone studio to keep warm, even as Giacometti often insisted upon the utmost stillness possible. Particularly helped by her solemn mouth, she appears to have been disturbed by the experience of sitting for a long period. Her eyes are directed in silent plea at Giacometti for any indication of the sitting's end, for Giacometti was known to work as long as he could convince his models to sit. Her low shoulders' height indicates that she assumes a relatively relaxed pose, but the movement between Giacometti's lines again suggests a taut tenseness in attempting to hold any pose still. While Giacometti wished for a stable continuity of the pose, he purposely waited for the breathing essence of the person to emerge from the stillness. For the longer they sat, interrogating each other's gaze, the more Giacometti's perception would shift over time—for even in the blink of an eye, the former image is lost to the next, requiring one to visually recompose the scene. Giacometti was after the depiction of the model becoming a person before him, of their active essence showing through, such as in a person's pulse ringing especially strong in their quiet sittings or in their unique fidgeting shifts as they attempted to hold a pose. All of these impressions of movement he then tried to record and make rattle through in the textural surfaces and gestures of his figures. Finally, he hoped their lines and textures would radiate out to his viewers and be further cast into movement through their eyes' wanderings and oscillations through the piece. As Jean Genet, a friend and model of Giacometti's, wrote about his works, "[A]round them space vibrates. Nothing is any longer at rest. Each angle (made with Giacometti's thumb when he was modeling the clay) or curve, or lump, or crest, or torn tip of sculpture are themselves not at rest. Each of them still emits the sensibility that created them. No point, no ridge that outlines or lacerates space is dead."[34]

Giacometti leaves the imprints of his ever-moving thumbs bare before us, allowing our eye to follow each slight adjustment and to keep alive the processes of his work through our active observations. The trail of his active hands moving through the clay surfaces of his sculptures palpably retains the activity of their movement, as though his hands had just left the figure moments ago, even while we may gaze upon the sculpture decades later. For in looking at something, we have a sense for what it would feel like at our touch. As Merleau-Ponty put it, our existence in a body as "visible and mobile . . . a thing among things . . . caught in the fabric of the world . . . [that] holds things in a circle around itself" is such that "things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are encrusted in its flesh, they are part of its full definition; [as] the world is made of the very stuff of the body."[35] There is a

34 Jean Genet, *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti* (L'Arbalète, 1958), 323.

35 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 125.



Left to right: **Figures 11–13.** Alberto Giacometti, *L'Homme qui chavire (Man Capsizing)*, 1950, cast 1951, painted bronze, 23.3 x 10.4 x 10.8 in., Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris.

sense in which Merleau-Ponty implies that as visible and mobile beings, all is within the reach of the visible and mobile, such that all that is visible we can imagine touching and all that we touch we can imagine seeing, as the two senses are inextricably bound up in our body as "an intertwining of vision and movement."[36]

One reaches out their hand to see how their fingers may fit into the grooves where Giacometti's once were. Genet succumbed to the impulse, finding himself unable to stop touching the statues in Giacometti's studio. Genet describes his experience of feeling Giacometti's figures, allowing his hands to see and feel what Giacometti had done, recalling their insuperable pull: "I look away and my hand continues its discoveries of its own accord: neck, head, nape of the neck, shoulders. . . . The sensations flow to my fingertips. . . . So my fingers repeat what Giacometti's have done. . . . And at last!—my hand lives, my hand sees."[37] Genet contrasts the experience to that of touching two small exact replicas of Donatello sculptures in his friends' possessions, works known for their serene, smooth modeling, but is disappointed as he claims "the bronze no longer responds; [it is] mute, dead."[38] Genet declares Giacometti a "sculptor for the blind," for indeed "it is Giacometti's hands, not his eyes, that create his objects, his figures."[39] Giacometti once told an interviewer that it is not only the eye which guides the hand, but also the hand which guides the eye—it is both.[40] He is aptly deemed a "sculptor for the blind," for it seems quite likely that Giacometti's sculptures could have a similar effect on the blind through touch as they do on the seeing through vision. Through an exploration of their textures, one could imagine how the surface's varied, ambiguous protrusions in the haptic as well as the visual would suggest a similar coming and going of the figure and a breathing, shifting being underneath the skin's surface. Ideally, one would do both, to see and touch Giacometti's surfaces as they index the body of the sculptor as a prime example of his "intertwining of vision and movement" at the mystic moment "when his vision becomes gesture."[41]

The quality of Giacometti's unceasing gestures in the clay, attempting to record the slightest change as it appears to him, with each movement building atop the next, is particularly apt for creating a sense of movement in the figure. *L'Homme qui chavire (Man Capsizing)* (1950), for example, which may translate to "Man Capsizing," is a particularly poetically poised figure exemplifying the many ways in which Giacometti's figures are perpetually caught in movement (Fig. 11–13). The work exhibits the familiar textural surfaces and ambiguous facial expressions, but delicately standing at only two feet tall, the focus is placed primarily on the

36 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 123.
37 Genet, *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, 317.
38 Genet, *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, 317.
39 Genet, *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, 325.
40 Alberto Giacometti, interview, 1962, from "Alberto Giacometti Reveals | KENISMAN Hommage," MannazGebo, posted on July 17, 2014, YouTube video, 8:30, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRVVFZKDSaw.
41 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 123, 139.

figure's stance, tilted on its toes to be perpetually on the cusp of falling. It is a work of subtle balance, with the figure testing the gravity of its cylindrical base, and with multiple angles in the round showing how dramatically different the figure's spatial disposition appears. From the front, it would appear that the figure has only its knees bent and its hands afloat in the air (Fig. 13). However, from the back, the figure seems nearly toppled over or capsized as its name suggests (Fig. 12). The multiple angles thus serve as one way to liberate the figure from feeling frozen in place, as it would appear that each perspective gives rise to a new impression of its movement, caught in a range of descent from standing to falling. A similar sentiment is posited by art historian Rosalind Krauss. As helpfully summarized by art historian Alexander C. Potts, Rosalind Krauss was concerned "not [with] the bodily sensations and gestures immediately suggested by the internal syntactical structure of the sculpture but rather [by] the bodily sensations produced in the viewer by the disparate apperceptions she or he had of the sculpture's configuration as seen from different standpoints."[42] For Krauss, it was crucial that a sculpture may give the viewer "the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views in each of which the object is given but in none of which it is given exhaustively."[43] Krauss was thus in line with Merleau-Ponty in advocating for the unlimited views which one could observe in their active movement around a sculptural figure. Further, Krauss appears to echo Giacometti's sentiments on the irreconcilability of the detail and the whole, where one is afforded an infinite sum of perspectival views, but none of which will present the object before oneself in its entirety.

However, as Merleau-Ponty explains in "Eye and Mind," capturing one fleeting moment tends to freeze the person in space, rather than expressing their movement. The idea, borrowing from Auguste Rodin's remarks, is that "instantaneous glimpses, unstable attitudes petrify movement, as is shown by so many photographs in which an athlete in motion is forever frozen," or in a horse photographed mid-gallop, "when he is completely off the ground, with his legs almost folded under him—an instant, therefore, when he must be moving" and yet "look[s] as if he were leaping in place."[44] In line with Rodin, Merleau-Ponty believes that movement will be understood only through an accumulation of glimpses and unstable attitudes which the figure has moved through. Giacometti's way of relentlessly recording and evolving his many instantaneous visions of the subject into his sculptural imprints exemplifies this way of bringing about movement into the figure. The idea, which Merleau-Ponty felt could be applied to painting as well as sculpture, was that the work, "itself would then offer to [one's] eyes the same thing offered them by real movements: a series of appropriately mixed, instantaneous glimpses along with, if a living thing is involved, attitudes unstably suspended between a before and an after."[45] In short, one would follow the indexicals, those "externals of a change of place which the spectator would read from the imprint it leaves."[46] It is in this way that Giacometti's figures appear as between movement and stillness, expression and rest—an irresolvable mixture of what Giacometti was able to observe within the patience of his models' time. Giacometti's sculptures are often caught in a movement one way or the next, between a gaze both left and right or in the overlapping of a smile and a frown. Furthermore, even in poses of rest, the surfaces of Giacometti's figures never cease to appear as though some movement is coming forth, with part of the form swelling outwards as another part retreats into a hidden nook.

Giacometti's famous *L'Homme qui marche II (Walking Man II)* (1960) particularly echoes the point Merleau-Ponty puts forward, in that the "only successful instantaneous glimpses of movement are those which approach this paradoxical arrangement" of the body in many instants at once, "when, for example, a walking man or woman is taken at the moment when both feet are touching the ground; for then we almost have the temporal ubiquity of the body which brings it about that the person *bestrides* space" (Fig. 14).[47] In the case of Giacometti's walking men, it is not only his surfaces that record many instants in time, but also the poses, portraying the body as itself between motions, as though caught between steps in time. The sculptures' feet are firmly planted on their foundation, and yet, from the gait of the stride, with the foremost foot planted and the farther one lifting,

42 Alex Potts, "The Phenomenological Turn," in *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (Yale University Press, 2001), https://aaeportal.com/?id=-14738.
43 Potts, "The Phenomenological Turn," 1.
44 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 144–145.
45 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 144.
46 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 144.
47 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 145.

**Figure 14.** Alberto Giacometti, *L'Homme qui marche II (Walking Man II)*, 1960, bronze, 72 x 37 x 8½ in., Guggenheim Museum.

**Figure 15.** Alberto Giacometti, *L'Homme qui marche II (Walking Man II)*, 1960, bronze, 72 x 37 x 8½ in. Photograph by Ernst Scheidegger.

our eyes move from one foot to the other to grasp the implied movement in the space between them. Caught in the "temporal ubiquity" of being in two places simultaneously, of being both planted to the ground and moving between steps, Giacometti's walking men step astride, spanning over space in time.

As Jean Genet put it, he is "the threadlike walking man. His lifted foot. He will never stop. And he walks firmly on the ground, that is, on a sphere."[48] Genet's mention of the *Walking Man II* upon the sphere of the earth evokes a Sisyphean edge to the figure's condemnation of always working towards that very same step. But unlike rolling a boulder up a hill, the *Walking Man II* never achieves any active movement. His back foot will always be on the cusp of rising, and his front foot, as implied by lifting back foot, will always be aware that its momentary planting upon the earth was intended to be fleeting. Excited by the mere gestural suggestion of movement, I find myself struck by the figure's pose of apparent hesitation, as though there were a momentary pause in his stride to attend to a distant sound or acknowledge another passing figure. A 1960 photograph by Ernst Scheidegger of the *Walking Man II* staged in a field adds further suggestion of the figure's momentary pause, as though captured by Scheidegger's camera at just the right interval when the *Walking Man II*'s feet touch the ground (Fig. 15). Only, his feet do not touch any external surface—Giacometti has fashioned them a small rectangular block of foundation upon which they are to stride. Wherever the *Walking Man II* travels, he will be met with another further paradox that he may only walk upon his small bronze foundation, made just long enough to accommodate his singular step's stride. His feet and the foundation are fashioned from one and the same material; the minimal separation evokes a sense that the *Walking Man II* simply arises from the earthen clay of his foundation. It is as though the *Walking Man II* apparated upon the earth, appearing within Scheidegger's grass field or a museum, as a mere emblem of a walking figure, attempting to blend into his surroundings, yet remaining distinctly outsized in a larger-than-life verticality. With only a thin slab to rest upon, the *Walking Man II* seems to have subsumed the sculptural pedestal, attempting, if not for that interstice of slab between him and the ground he rests upon, to eliminate the usual barrier between the earthly and the sculptural realm.

Nevertheless, the angle of the pose feels adroitly natural, its torso angled forward with a determined air of purpose, not unlike the pose that Henri Cartier-Bresson catches Giacometti in, striding in parallel beside the striking six-foot *Walking Man II* in the foreground and *Tall Woman IV* at his side, while helping to move one of his smaller sculptures prior to an exhibition at Galerie Maeght (Fig. 16). The *Walking Man II*'s thin volume and dark surface of the cast bronze lends itself well to assuming the role of the passing figure in our peripheral vision. When standing beside him, shoulder to shoulder as though beside someone in the street, our eye catches only their brief outline in passing, indistinct and void of the fullness that comes in a frontal encounter with a person at

48 Genet, *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, 324.

**Figure 16.** Alberto Giacometti setting up at Galerie Maeght, Paris, 1961.
Photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson.

rest. Perhaps this is also why Giacometti felt that "a sculpture's internal inert matter was at odds with the vitality he wished to convey."[49] Giacometti was interested in the elusiveness of how we perceive people: in the glimpse of a person passing us by in the street or the distance at which a person approached from afar, such that at every second, their depth was an active question of both coming into vision and eluding us. As we walk around the *Walking Man II,* our eyes dart to the figure in our peripheral, as though to check whether he has moved position along with us. His frontal view appears confrontational, with his face and chest jutting out towards us as though I am in his way. I naturally find myself stepping to the side of the figure to walk beside him. In the peripheral view, in the blurry glimpse, with my feet mirroring his, rocking forward and back as though on a pendulum such that I may eventually step beyond the figure, Giacometti's *Walking Man II* magically comes alive, like any other passing figure on the street.

## V. Distance and proximity

One particular evening in Paris in 1937, Giacometti caught a glimpse of his lover at the time, Isabel Nicholas, an English artist and model, from a distance, while she was standing on the Boulevard Saint-Michel at midnight, with the sky as a "huge blackness above her."[50] "The apparition of her far-off figure surrounded by space" left a profound, indelible impression on the artist.[51] The sculptures that resulted were tiny in scale, perhaps to represent Nicolas's silhouetted appearance at a far distance. The pair were separated during the war, with Nicholas returning to England and Giacometti leaving for Geneva to escape the war and visit family on December 31st, 1941, the final day before his exit visa expired. Splitting his time between Geneva, Stampa, and Maloja in Switzerland between 1942 and 1945, Giacometti remained hard at work on his miniature sculptures, some of which were no larger than a paperclip. The memory of Nicholas, standing on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, remained in his mind even from a distance. During this time in Switzerland, Giacometti also met his future wife, Annette Arm (1923–1993), in a brasserie in her native Geneva in 1943 where she was working for the Red Cross at the time. Giacometti explains his dilemma at the time, that in "wanting to create from memory what [he] had seen," to his "terror the sculptures became smaller and smaller," only appearing to hold a likeness when very small.[52] The dimensions revolted against Giacometti, but no matter how tirelessly he tried, the result was the same.

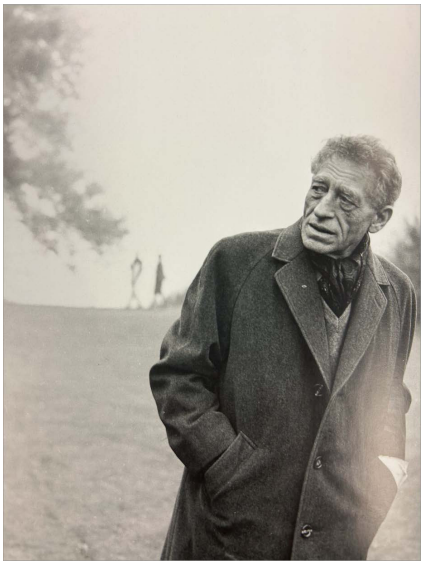
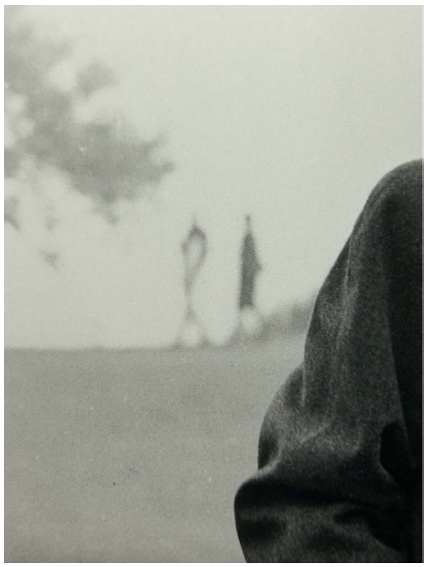
49 Moorhouse, *Giacometti*, 140.
50 Thierry Dufrêne, "Giacometti's Geneva Period (1941–1945): The Birth of New Sculpture," in *Giacometti: Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Read and Julia Kelly (Routledge, 2009), 115.
51 Moorhouse, *Giacometti*, 103.
52 Giacometti, "Letter to Pierre Matisse," 44.

Upon Giacometti's post-war return to Paris in September of 1945, the sculptural efforts from his time in Switzerland were small enough to be packed away and transported in six matchboxes. Soon after Giacometti and Nicholas finally reunited in Paris in the fall of 1945, their romance fizzled, "the fervid production of Giacometti's miniatures," going alongside it, as art historian Joanna Fiduccia wrote.[53] Importantly, Professor Joanna Fiduccia, in her 2017 dissertation, "Hollow Man: Alberto Giacometti and the Crisis of the Monument, 1935–45," sees this reductive period in Giacometti's sculptures, which is often dismissed as "an artistic crisis," as instead to be profoundly generative in its destruction. She sees this period "not as shambolic breakdown, but as a form and experience of substance attained through processes of destruction."[54] As Fiduccia explains, Giacometti's tiny figurines were daring works, with Giacometti's submission barred from the Swiss National Exhibition in Zurich in 1939. For the figures challenged our understanding of the typical scalar relationship of the viewer to the sculpture as just an anatomical head or bust to instead confront "the viewer with a spatiality that was not her spatiality."[55] Ironically, Fiduccia found that "a tiny object made everything big, such that there would be no escaping the monument, even in the seemingly most anti-monumental work," and that "paradoxically, the struggle to represent [i.e., the sky] without reduction takes the form of the miniature."[56] In this light, we can view Giacometti's miniature endeavors in the years of 1935–1945 leading up to the mature period of elongated figures as a significant exploration into new depictions of our proximity to the sculptural form. Reinhold Hohl also casts this period of Giacometti's in a positive, formative light, as "probably for the first time in the history of sculpture, a sculptural figure was not a copy of a body in real space, but an imaginary form (as the objects of a painting always are) in its own space, a space that was simultaneously real and imaginary, tangible and yet impossible to enter."[57]

In 1945, upon Giacometti's return to his Parisian studio, which was maintained by his brother Diego, who worked as his studio assistant and on his own pieces of furniture, Giacometti found that his studio was among the only things that remained relatively unchanged. After a period of about four years in exile from Paris while it was under German occupation, Giacometti returned to a Paris "profoundly affected by recent events, its artistic and intellectual life shaken to the roots."[58] In particular, Giacometti recalled an epiphany he experienced upon walking out of a cinema called Actualités Montparnasse one evening in late 1945. While in the cinema, Giacometti remembered finding himself suddenly overcome by a profound realization in which he describes, "I no longer knew what I was seeing on the screen: instead of its being figures, it was becoming black and white blobs, that's to say they were losing all meaning, and instead of looking at the screen I kept looking at my neighbours, who were becoming something altogether unknown."[59] One can sense the sort of dissolution of the figures on the screen at the Actualités Montparnasse for Giacometti by looking at a Bo Boustedt photograph, which shows the wispy, nearly incorporeal figures of two people in the distance over Giacometti's shoulder (Fig. 17–18). Similarly, they dissolve into dots on the page, almost inhuman compared to Giacometti's detailed, dominant presence in the foreground. His revelation in the cinema in 1945 centered around the recognition that the supposedly realistic figures captured on the screen were nothing more than two-dimensional dots on the flat screen. What felt real, although unknown to him, was his visceral perception of the audience members beside him, as intimately connected to him through his vision of them and their shared position with him in space.

As Giacometti later recounted, it was the singular most profound shift in perception he had experienced. Upon his first step outside the cinema, Giacometti wrote, "Upon going out on the boulevard I had the feeling of being faced with something I had never seen before, with a complete change in reality—the unseen, the altogether

53 Fiduccia, "Hollow Man," 150.
54 Fiduccia, "Hollow Man," iii.
55 Joanna Fiduccia, "Scale of the Nation: Alberto Giacometti's Miniature Monument," *Art History* 45, no. 1 (2022): 149, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12633.
56 Fiduccia, "Scale of the Nation," 149.
57 Reinhold Hohl, "Chronology," in *Alberto Giacometti: Sculpture, Paintings, Drawings*, ed. Angela Schneider (Prestel, 1994), 27.
58 Moorhouse, *Giacometti*, 12.
59 Pierre Schneider, "My Long March," in *Alberto Giacometti: Works, Writings, Interviews*, by Angel González (Polígrafa, 2006), 141.

Left to right: **Figure 17–18.** Alberto Giacometti in the park of the Louisiana Museum in Humlebæk, 1965. Photograph and detail by Bo Boustedt.

unknown, marvellous. . . . And at the same time, the silence, an unbelievable sort of silence. And then this grew."[60] Giacometti's focus in this period shifted to the boulevards of Paris that suddenly were imbued with such newfound interest. Giacometti repeatedly recalled the momentous cinema occasion, stating, "From that day on, because I had realized the difference between my way of seeing in the street and the way things are seen in photography and film—I wanted to represent what I saw."[61] Giacometti found himself particularly struck by the vast space of the street, such that "its component parts [were] distanced from him in irreducible space."[62] As his longtime friend and supporter, Simone de Beauvoir, recalled of the period, "His real concern was to defend himself against the infinite and terrifying vacuity of space. There was a whole period when, as he was walking down the street, he had to test the solidity of the walls with his hand to resist the abyss that was gaping open just next to him."[63]

Daily and nightly walks now took up a good part of Giacometti's time. From that point forward Giacometti felt able to walk without his walking stick, which he picked up following a car accident on October 18th, 1938.[64] When at a standstill, Giacometti found a kind of recourse in his drawing, a tool that remained a fundamentally grounding practice throughout his career. When he could not paint or sculpt, Giacometti drew. Giacometti now "sketched people in the street, and in a new way: they formed elongated stick-figures, and he worked as if in 'shorthand,' drawing sketchy, loosely intersecting lines across the whole sheet."[65] Giacometti's drawings of the street profoundly affected his sculptural style. He no longer sought to "evolve an image that would correspond to the image preserved in his memory, but rather to achieve phenomenological reproduction of the reality he observed in front of him: an entity that was small and slight in relation to the whole field of vision, incorporeal and weightless."[66] Giacometti's drawing of *The City Square* (1949) demonstrates his loose, incorporeal style of sketching, using sparse, thin dynamic lines to gesturally suggest the presence of passing figures on the street before him (Fig. 19). The figures barely read as human figures, having a wispy air of being here one moment and gone the next, as though Giacometti only had enough time to jot down a few lines of their likeness before they walked out of sight. The figures' sparse lines convey a sense of weightlessness to their presence, full of space around and within themselves, as though they were apparitions passing through the air.

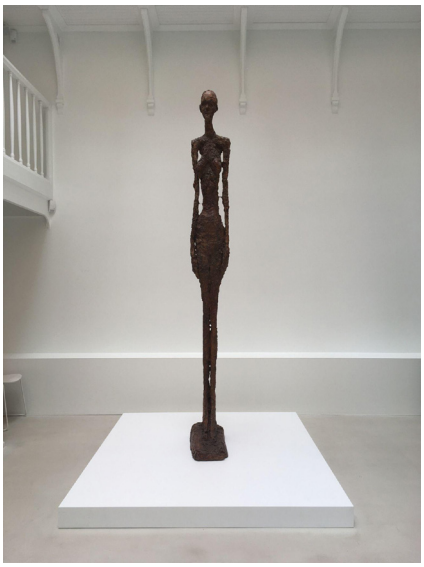
60 Schneider, "My Long March," 141.
61 Dieter Honisch, "Scale in Giacometti's Sculpture," in *Alberto Giacometti: Sculpture, Paintings, Drawings*, ed. Angela Schneider (Prestel, 1994), 65.
62 Hohl, "Chronology," 26.
63 Peter Read, "Introduction," in *Giacometti: Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Read and Julia Kelly (Routledge, 2009), 5.
64 Christian Klemm et al., *Alberto Giacometti* (Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 284.
65 Hohl, "Chronology," 26.
66 Hohl, "Chronology," 26.

**Figure 19.** Alberto Giacometti, *The City Square*, 1949, ink and colored ink on paper, 12⅜ x 20⅛ in., gift of Alexander Liberman in honor of René d'Harnoncourt, © 2024 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and ADAGP, Paris.

**Figure 20.** Alberto Giacometti, *Piazza (City Square)*, 1948, bronze, 8½ x 25⅜ x 17¼ in., The Museum of Modern Art, New York, purchase. Photograph by Ernst Scheidegger, NZZ Pro Litteris, © 2001 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and ADAGP, Paris.

**Figure 21.** Alberto Giacometti, *Trois Hommes qui marchent dans la rue (Grand plateau) (Three Men Walking on the Street (Large Pedestal))*, 1948, bronze with dark brown patina, 28½ x 16⅘ x 16 in. Photograph by Gordon Parks, 1951, © Fondation Giacometti, Paris.

Sculptural works such as *Piazza (City Square)* (1948) and *Trois Hommes qui marchent dans la rue (Grand plateau) (Three Men Walking on the Street (Large Pedestal))* (1948) have their origins in these street drawing studies, as his initial sculptural renderings of the sketches (Fig. 20–21). The sculptural groupings depict multiple men upon moderately sized platforms (8½ in. by 25⅜ in. by 17¼ in. and 29½ in. by 13 in. by 12½ in., respectively), walking amongst each other. Importantly, the figures are surrounded by empty space and never touch one another, as though it were theoretically possible that they did not occupy the same space at all, or as Giacometti often assessed about how people walk in the street, as though they were in the familiar unspoken dance of avoiding others in crowds. The figures match each other's dimensions, reading as small landscapes of people upon accordingly sized platforms. Gordon Parks's 1951 photograph of *Three Men Walking on the Street (Large Pedestal)* demonstrates the diminutive contrast between the larger people walking on the street ahead and Giacometti's small spindly figures, who despite occupying the foreground of the photograph are dwarfed by the stepping feet of the passersby in the background behind them (Fig. 21). Ernst Scheidegger's photograph of *City Square* staged on a cracked stone street also subtly demonstrates the distinction in scale between the figures' small



Left to right: **Figures 22–24.** Alberto Giacometti, *Grand Femme IV (Tall Woman IV)*, 1960–1961, bronze, 106.29 x 12.40 x 22.24 in., Institut Giacometti, Paris, July 2, 2023.

raised platform, appropriately fitted to their heights, and the expansive street surrounding them, which continues out of frame (Fig. 20).

Giacometti was determined; however, to overcome his compulsion to reduce his sculptures' scale, as he had struggled with for years in Switzerland during the wartime. Perhaps on paper, in recording a person walking by in the mere shorthand of a simple sketched stick-figure, Giacometti found how easily he could extend the lines of the stick-figure person until they became taller and thinner on the page. The figures grew in height, but lost in mass—until they were just a few mere lines on the page, taking on the slightest presence in relation to the paper's blank space. What began as a drawing experiment took on the lifelike presence Giacometti had hoped for. Recalling the time, he explained, "All this [struggle with scale] changed a little in 1945 through drawing. This led me to want to make larger figures, then to my surprise, they achieved resemblance only when long and slender."[67] While Giacometti appeared to have overcome the problem of scale, the problem of distance remained. When scaling the figures skyward, he did not resolve the indistinctness that his miniatures once had by virtue of their being almost no volume to carve details into the forms. The figures stood at a towering scale: the *Walking Man II* on the more grounded side at approximately 6 feet 2 inches, compared to the monumental *Tall Woman IV*, standing at 8 feet 10 inches, while their surfaces remained indecipherable as jagged, cracked, and full of the familiar pinch and prod of Giacometti's hands. With a figure so large, one would assume that we would be better equipped to approach its details as inscribed all over such an expansive scale of dimension. Yet, even at an immense scale, they are seen at a distance. As one draws closer to a sculpture such as *Tall Woman IV*, expecting that proximity will bring clarity, one finds more confusion (Fig. 22–24).

For instance, what from a distance appeared to be a depth to the eye socket in *Tall Woman IV* reveals itself as a confounding lack—a smooth surface that has lost all suggestion of an eyeball or even a pupil. As one rounds the corner of the frontal view, hoping the flat outline of her figure may expand into a more robust body, one is startled to find her only further flattened, with the few places of volume, of her chest, lower stomach, bottom, feet, and particularly her head, appearing abnormally outsized on the sparse, eerily skeletal form. As Sartre wrote, "One cannot approach a sculpture of Giacometti. Do not expect this breast to swell as you move towards it: it will not change, and you, while approaching, will have a peculiar impression of standing still," for perhaps as you draw nearer, the woman only draws farther towards the sky.[68] Sartre continued to the details of the nipples, describing the confounding experience of drawing closer to them such that "we have intimations of them, we guess at them, now we are on the point of seeing them: another step or two, and we still have only an inkling of them: one more

67 Alberto Giacometti, "Letter to Pierre Matisse," 44.

68 Angela Schneider, "As If from Afar: Constant in the Work of Alberto Giacometti," in *Alberto Giacometti: Sculpture, Paintings, Drawings* (Prestel, 1994), 72.

step, and everything vanishes, only the folds in the plaster remain."[69] One leans over the work's thin flat white pedestal, edging to get a closer look and fill their eyes with the details of the work and the work alone—but even inches away, you can never get close enough to decode all the distant cracks, hills, and valleys your eye continues to find itself lost in. Nor is the towering woman ever fleshed out enough to occlude your vision, always privileging a view of her in the context of her surroundings. *Tall Woman IV* is surrounded by a vast emptiness that seems to squeeze her further into her compactness due to the sheer contrast of her thinness in open space. Even at arm's length and two times your height, Giacometti's *Tall Woman IV* will always be a distant figure, a slim pole, like an axis, reminding you of all the space surrounding her.

As Jean Genet aptly described of the distance in Giacometti's mature period sculptures, "Not only do the statues come toward you as if they were very far away . . . but wherever you happen to be in relation to them, they manage to make you, looking at them, do so from below. They are, far away on a remote horizon, upon an eminence, and you are at the foot of this rising ground. They come, eager to meet you, and to pass you."[70] Whether one is literally below, at the base of *Tall Woman IV*, or looking upon *City Square*'s shadow-like spindly figures with surface textures that vibrate even without squinting at them, they always keep us at a distance, perpetually lost whether viewing them from afar or up close. Merleau-Ponty wrote that "to see is to *have at a distance*."[71] Giacometti, according to Merleau-Ponty, has thus captured his goal of presenting to us in sculptural form the real functioning of our sight—as always at a distance from the figure. For Giacometti, there was a wonder in the small figure walking in space, as a function of making one's field of vision become much larger. As he described figures in the distance, there is "a vast space above and around that is almost limitless."[72] As Giacometti explained, "If a person came nearer, increasing in size until he or she occupied the artist's entire field of vision, then one's interest in the act of seeing that person waned: I want to touch them, don't I? There is no longer any interest in looking."[73] Giacometti was thus interested chiefly in keeping his figures at a visual distance, holding them there captive, and also holding his audience in this state of onlooking curiosity if not transfixion.

## VI. Conclusion

Giacometti's imperative was to "create an object capable of conveying a sensation as close as possible as one felt at the sight of the subject."[74]

What Giacometti brought us from his mature period (1945–1966) was an emphasis on the active experience of looking. The audience always has something to endeavor to find, to discover, and to complete with their own viewing of the artist's work. I believe the continued interest in Giacometti's work arises from the sense that there must be something still to see in his artwork that cannot be grasped upon a quick glance. While Giacometti may have struggled to bring a person's presence into visibility, despairing at the unending project of materializing sight, it is his viewers who, in their active looking and movement around the figures, can continue this work—aspiring to see, albeit at a distance, what animation lingers in their surfaces.

Attempting to grasp the figure as a whole from a distance, we are reminded of the familiar inability of our eye to synthesize the many disparate parts of a figure altogether. Our eyes oscillate through the textures of Giacometti's surfaces, allowing only a brief settling upon one interpretation of the form before a slight blink and refocus of the eyes moves our perception towards a new visual interpretation. The scale of Giacometti's figures invites us to move forward and alongside them, to walk with them and around them, but they remain distant regardless of our proximity. Quickly passing by *Walking Man II* or receding upwards as one approaches *Tall Woman IV* leaves you pondering at the ever-present distance between the sculptures and yourself, where Giacometti's figures continue to elude even as one draws closer. However, it is this quality of Giacometti's work that is its greatest strength. As aptly put by Jean Genet, "The beauty of Giacometti's sculptures seems to reside in

69 Schneider, "As If from Afar," 72.
70 Genet, *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, 323.
71 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 127.
72 Schneider, "As If from Afar," 67.
73 Schneider, "As If from Afar," 67.
74 Moorhouse, *Giacometti*, 104.

this incessant, uninterrupted oscillation from the remotest distance to the closest familiarity: this oscillation never ends, and that is how it can be said that the sculptures are in motion."[75] Giacometti did not intend to simplify the difficulty of seeing: that is, of the endless pursuit of making sense of the surfaces and depths of things in the world. Rather, he succeeded in rendering this struggle in sculptural form.

The seeds of Giacometti's interrogation with phenomenological scale dated back even to his early childhood. Giacometti recalled in a late interview with David Sylvester in *Écrits* of an early drawing lesson with his father Giovanni Giacometti back in Stampa, Switzerland on drawing some pears in a simple still life. The pears were set at a typical distance for a still life, seated a few meters away from their canvases. But each time Alberto began to draw, the pears came out quite small. His father, irritated, instructed him to "begin by drawing them as they are, as you see them!'"[76] Giovanni corrected the size to his liking, and Alberto attempted to follow, but he could not stop himself from erasing away and within a half hour the pears had returned to the size of his original attempt "within a millimeter."[77] The problem remained, that Giacometti could only depict the pears as he saw them, as small objects a few meters away in the distance, while Giacometti's father was able to abstract the pears to "life-size" to fill the center of the canvas.[78]

As art historian Reinhold Hohl posits, "At some fundamental level, Giacometti mistook the subject of his sculpture. All while believing he was depicting a pear or a head, he was in fact depicting the intervening distance between him and it."[79] Here Hohl invokes Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, when he asks, "[I]s not a man smaller at two hundred yards than at five yards away? [H]e is neither smaller nor indeed equal in size: he is anterior to equality and inequality; he is the same man seen from farther away."[80] Giacometti, who was known to mark out lines on his studio floor to keep consistent the distance between the sitter and himself, was ever attuned to the distance between what he could see and himself seeing and well understood that we could not see man if not at a distance. Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre agreed, arguing that Giacometti "aimed at sculpting appearance itself—and, in so doing, paradoxically arrived at the absolute: 'man as he is seen—from a distance.'"[81] We could spend a lifetime, as Giacometti did, attempting to render all the details of an individual, as they inevitably shift and emerge before us as an active, breathing, changing, and aging individual. Our perceptions of people, like the people whom we perceive, are impossible to solidify into one result.

To attempt to set a definitive account of one's appearance would be untrue. Giacometti thus settles for a depiction unsettled—one with a texture that will move as you move, and an appearance which fails to resolve upon your closer approach. It is in this way that Giacometti's works move us, drawing us into his visual puzzles—as interested as we are perplexed, distant as we are close, and always feeling as though there is more to find—that is, if we could just get closer and stay longer.

It is also in this way that I liken the moving presence of Giacometti's art to the presence of a human before us. We believe that we know a person's appearance from our brief encounters with their image, from our daily conversations to our sitting across from them at the dinner table. But if we slow down to observe at the same arduous rate Giacometti did, we may also find that even if our wife posed for us for just three days, we may fail to recognize her as we did those three days prior. She would fade away from familiarity, as in a 1957 *Esquisse (Sketch)* of Giacometti's wife, Annette. There, she appears as a mirage of a woman, barely perceptible or material. With her head tilting backwards, Annette's ghostly image recedes into the smoky background darkened around her figure, as though she is being subsumed into a dark hole of the canvas, her familiar presence sitting across from her husband mystically slipping away (Fig. 25).

The poet Jacques Dupin recounted an exchange he observed one evening with the Giacomettis in the 1950s after Annette had been posing for Giacometti all afternoon: "Over dinner, [Annette] asked her husband

75 Genet, *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, 317.
76 Fiduccia, "Hollow Man," 150.
77 Fiduccia, "Hollow Man," 150.
78 Fiduccia, "Hollow Man," 150.
79 Fiduccia, "Hollow Man," 150.
80 Fiduccia, "Hollow Man," 150–151.
81 Fiduccia, "Hollow Man," 128.

**Figure 25.** Alberto Giacometti, *Esquisse (Sketch)*, 1957, oil on canvas, 28¾ x 23⅝ in., Kunsthaus Zürich.

why he was looking at her in such an intense manner. He replied, 'Because I haven't seen you all day.'"[82] Annette or Giacometti's brother Diego could pose for him nearly "ten thousand times,"[83] but when they posed, the artist claimed that he did not recognize them. There was always something more to find, not just externally but internally, even in those as close to him as his own brother or wife. Yet, it was also Diego and Annette whose faces appeared again and again no matter who was sitting for the portrait, for these were the heads Giacometti had done the most. Consciously or not, these faces held a comfortable familiarity for Giacometti, and his works frequently featured their visages. As we have learned of his relentless artistic process, the essence of Giacometti's work was to repeat: to draft, to sculpt, and to outline once more in nearly the same way in hopes that he may witness a perceptible difference emerge out of the ordinary, no matter how small it may appear on the surface to others. It is in this sense that we may find that the portraits done by Giacometti are more reflections of himself, materializations of those closest to his mind and body at the time, than of the various subjects he depicts. Giacometti thus ultimately prioritized the deeper, more resonant sensations within himself over any weaker sensation of an individual likeness—perhaps at the expense of drawing criticism for the repetitiveness of his body of work.

What Giacometti presents to us is an enduring quality of leaving his work as essentially unresolved. Its essence is to describe the impossibility of being concluded and the inability of settling upon one representative image of our subjects. Our eyes retrace Giacometti's hands, but they will never recreate his exact movements in succession. Rather, his audience will always find a new path through the figure, forming their own phenomenological impression of the subject. One may follow the movements which brought their texture to the surface and the emotions of the individual which made settling upon one definite expression impossible. Giacometti's viewers are presented with a mélange of instants, given all at once. We stay a while, drawing close to the figure, endeavoring to move our perspective such as to allow a few instants of likeness in the figure to reveal themselves alongside our shifting perspective. But at some point, we must walk away, as Giacometti was forced to, leaving the rest to be discovered by the next set of eyes and feet. As Merleau-Ponty ended his essay "Eye and Mind," "If creations are not permanent acquisitions, it is not just that, like all things, they pass away: it is also that they have almost their entire lives before them."[84] As long as Giacometti's works have an active eye and body to observe them, his sculptures, and the legacy of his movements through them, will live on.

82 Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Iconic Experience in Art and Life: Standing before Giacometti's Standing Woman," in *Object Lessons*, ed. Anna Hammond (Yale University Art Gallery, 2007), 45.

83 Alexander, "Iconic Experience," 45.

84 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 149.

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