The Anachronistic Topicality of Casts

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n L’Empreinte, Georges Didi-Huberman offers “an anachronistic point of view” about a matter whose history still remains to be written. Readers conversant with this philosopher-phenomenologist’s earlier works will recognize a concept that recurs in them, bequeathed, specifically, by the “dialectic image” which Walter Benjamin defines as “that in which the Ernstwhile meets the Now in a flash that forms a constellation”. Two- and three-dimensional casts, hollow (or negative) and relief (produced by moulding), are style-less forms, at least if the term style is given the ordinary meaning of a set of historically determined, variable features. There is actually nothing that makes formal distinctions between castings of hands made in the 5th century BCE—ex-votos—hailing from the Maleporos sanctuary at Selinunte in Sicily—15th century castings attributed to Michelangelo’s studio, and the Picasso casting of a fist, made in 1937. The cast would thus seem to be an anthropological fact—akin to a relic, as Aby Warburg might put it. It is an anachronistic object, fundamentally alien both to quests for some kind of origin and to artistic teleological doctrines. It is, one might say, marked by the convergence of heterogeneous temporal aspects: “The immaterial nature of an area of expertise [here] meets a present-day practice” (p. 17). We might well add to the above-mentioned examples the fist cast by Giuseppe Penone and affixed to a tree in 1968, thus indefinitely prolonging a fleeting reading, and the graphite and plaster cast made by Pascal Convert in 1994—strange ripostes to the Selinunte ex-votos spanning twenty centuries.

The topicality of images and objects produced by cast is broadly illustrated by the well-documented catalogue prepared by Georges Didi-Huberman and Didier Semin, where we find the works shown at the Pompidou centre exhibition. Both anachronistic and as up-to-date as you can get, the cast presupposes the part of the interpreter and amateur alike an openness to the fact that is capable of grasping the enumerations and complexities which underpin the anthropological and phenomenological effectiveness of this extremely paradoxical object. The cast is in fact presence and absence, ascendance and aloofness. It involves the simplifying dichotomy between the visual and the tactile. It imposes a “contact eye” (p. 69). It encompasses fleeting demarcation and fossilized remanence; the one-and-only and sequential dissemination; sameness and its alteration; digital authenticity and casting, setting and duplication; the makeshift and the most complex of production lines; the shapeless trace and elegance or aura. As a face, the cast may be a live portrait or a funeral mask perpetuating its secret connivance with death down the centuries. Other encounters: caresses of bodies and interlocking parts, flanged forms and counter forms. Between flesh, desire, and mechanical reproduction, Duchamp-like reversible places—from positive to negative—and the infinitesimally small have found a very persuasive player in the author.


The open and dialectical anachronism of the cast tallies with the author’s methodological anachronism. Readers aware of the use of a vocabulary that respects the chronology of the facts to which it applies will possibly be surprised to come upon the term “readymade” used with respect to Donatello, and then Rodin. In Judith and Holophernes, the legs of Holophernes’ legs are the product of a life-size casting, and Judith’s veil, made using a real veil steeped in hot wax, is a “sort of ready-made designed to be cast [..] as had been the practice in Florence since the Middle Ages, in the context of witchcraft” (p. 69). Julius von Schlosser recorded these goings-on back in 1911—in other terms, needless to add (cf. infra). As far as Rodin’s work is concerned, Georges Didi-Huberman extends the analyses of Leo Steinberg, who was the first to emphasize the procedural value of part or literally disembowelled castings which the sculptor made from his “original plaster”.

The Moissac hands, the constraints of the style and the context of use, the finality and objectification in the contemporary period. This lack of agreement comes to the fore in the two parts forming the book cum-catalogue. It does not suggest any shortcoming. But it leaves the major question of the relationships between certain recent works and other for the most part earlier works, which nevertheless attest to comparable procedures, hanging in mid-air. “All the problems which exercise us (...) are contained in the problematic hand” (p. 16). In a recent article, Claude Viallat declared in 1982, adding that the hands he had made by blowing stemmed from his visit to the Gargas cave. Here the anthropological dimension of the cast has taken on the form of a survival than of a reaction in the form of a procedural “borrowing”. Pascal Convert’s Autoportrait (1993) consists in a negative cast of his face contained in a hanging urn. In relation to this work, Jean-Pierre Cirioli rightly calls to mind “a dialogue with the age-old forms of the ex-voto and the reliquary”. But should this connivance between a very recent urn-face and, for example, the hollow cast of a Roman funeral mask (fig. 15, p. 48), be interpreted as an anthropological recurrence or, without dodging this dimension, should we attach to it the deliberateness which hallmarks a borrowing? We should address this question to the artist at this juncture.

The above observations apply to many of Giuseppe Penone’s works, such as the Arbre de vertebres, produced in 1996, and shown this summer at the Carré d’Art in Nîmes, part of an exhibition of his recent works. Like most of the sculptor’s pieces, this reveals the metaphor that has been made, for all to see. It is in fact the outcome of the dovetailing of six section casts obtained turn by turn from a skull. So it appears like the final state of a self-generating process within which the volumes are lightened and become less and less identifiable as their size increases. What kind of links are there between this skull “cast on top of a skull” and the skull “modellled on top of a skull”, and more particularly those coming from Ramad, in Syria, with regard to which Georges Didi-Huberman stresses the “interplay of form and counter-form, (...) of the vanishing form (...) and the forming form” (p. 41): mere chance, anthropological recurrence, or transformed borrowing? Apart from Marcel Duchamp, Giuseppe Penone was the best represented artist in the exhibition devoted to casts. There is thus nothing surprising about the fact that Georges Didi-Huberman should write an article in the Carré d’Art catalogue. This article was titled “Etre crâne”, and dealt with an anatomical drawing by Leonardo da Vinci depicting the cross-section of a human skull, side by side with a diagram showing a half onion. In the text accompanying the drawing, Leonardo likened the tissues and nerves cut
through by the dissector to concentric layers of (onion) skin. It is tempting to interpret Penone's casting on top of casting as a "reverse" response to the skull-skin explored by Leonardo. Georges Didi-Huberman does not go quite this far, but his analysis definitely benefits from not succumbing to the conventional poetry of the natura naturans to which the sculptor's approach is usually reduced. The Nimes catalogue also includes a helpful introduction by Guy Tosatto and a very comprehensive collection of writings by the Italian artist.

The Macula publishing house has come out with an outstanding translation of the Histoire du portrait en cire (1911) by Julius von Schlosser. Wax-casting for votive and funerary purposes appeared in very early Antiquity, and did not die out until the 19th century, when the daguerreotype found favour with the bourgeoisie. It subsequently became a teaching tool in anatomical institutes, and is now nothing more than a curio put on view at fair stands, in Madame Tussaud's and at the Musée Grévin. Before the conspicuous comeback of casting in 20th century art—a phenomenon which historians could clearly not have foreseen—the decline of the wax portrait went hand in hand with its "theoretical banishment" (p. 144). The grounds for this damnatio memoriae lie in the production processes, the material used, and the functions assigned to wax-casting. As a method, it is in fact too anonymous to be acknowledged as a work of art. It is also too colourful to be sculptural, its texture is too organic, and it looks too like a conjuring trick. As a last word, it is too "animistic". The Roman imagines described by Pliny the Elder, the boti of the Florentine cerajuoli, the effigies of Westminster, clad in ceremonial attire, and those made in France by court painters, the portraits of the Austrian imperial family, with their prying accuracy, the statuary of Gaetano Zumbo, whose illusionistic style is truly scary—it was to counter the demotion of all these works that the Histoire du portrait de cire was written, and it is this that makes it so topical today.

Translated from the French by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods.

4. The author showed a previous interest in the Italian artist's work in the catalogue for the group show Régions de dissimiliane, likewise organized with Guy Tosatto and shown in 1990 at the Musée départemental in Rochechouart.