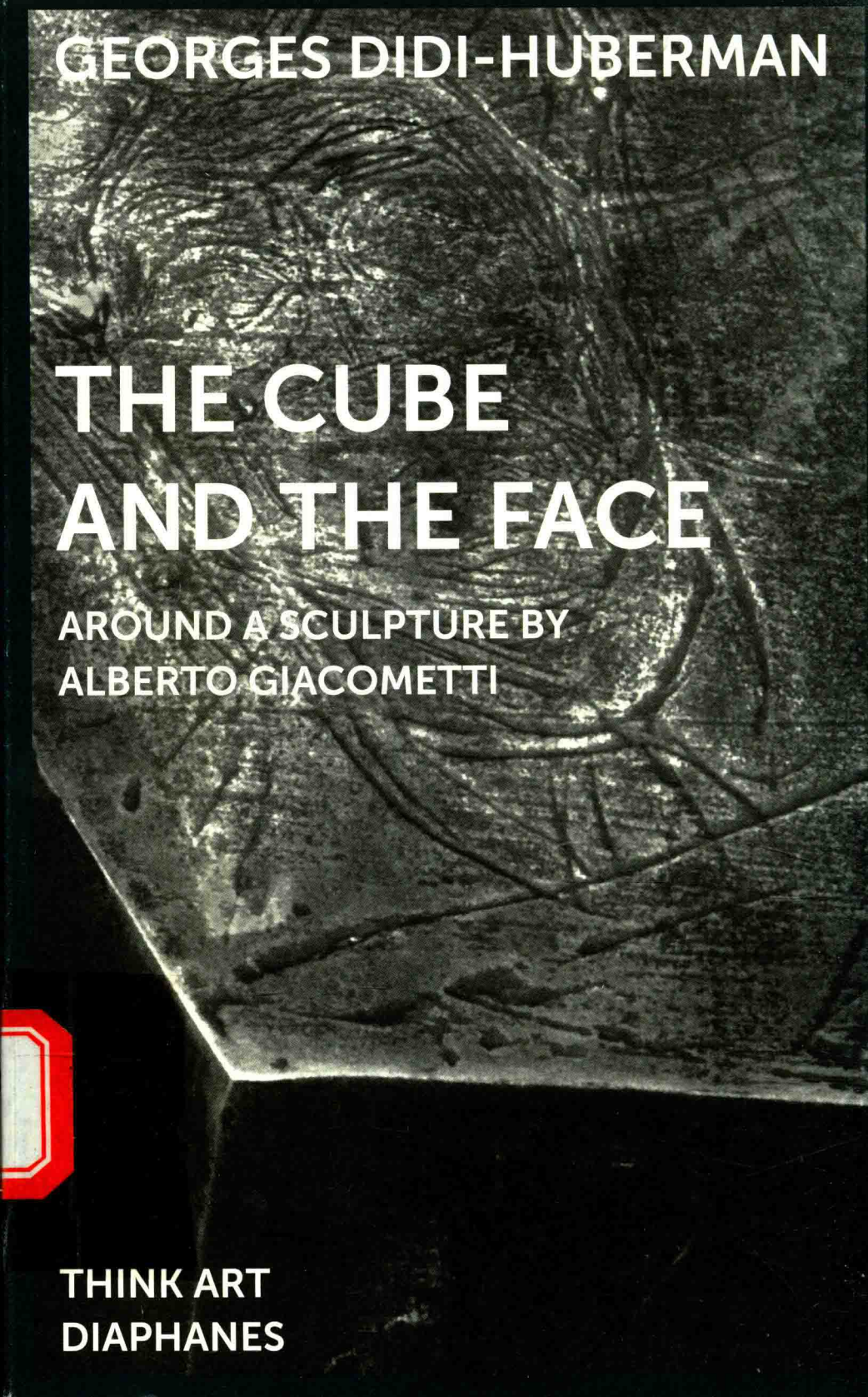




GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN

THE CUBE AND THE FACE

AROUND A SCULPTURE BY
ALBERTO GIACOMETTI



THINK ART
DIAPHANES

Georges Didi-Huberman

The Cube and the Face

Around a Sculpture by Alberto Giacometti

Edited by Mira Fliescher und Elena Vogman

Translated by Shane B. Lillis

diaphanes

French Edition:

Le cube et le visage. Autour d'une sculpture d'Alberto Giacometti

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The Cube and the Face

Blank planes touch close sheer white all gone from
mind. Little body ash grey locked rigid heart beating
face to endlessness. [...]. Four square true refuge long
last four walls over backwards no sound. [...] Little body
little block heart beating ash grey only upright.

Samuel Beckett, "Lessness".¹

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Note

An earlier version of these remarks was conceived for the Giacometti exhibition at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, but it had to be reduced to the publication of a small sketch ("Sur les treize faces du Cube," in *Alberto Giacometti, Sculptures, peintures, dessins*, ed. Suzanne Pagé, Paris: Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville, 1991, p. 43-46). Beyond the opportunity created by this retrospective exhibition, and before that by a visit to the Kunsthaus in Zurich the following text owes a great deal to two recently published works among many other studies on Giacometti. The first is the collection of his own writings, published in French under the direction of M. Leiris and J. Dupin (*Écrits*, edited by Mary L. Palmer and François Chaussende); the second is the monumental monograph by Yves Bonnefoy entitled *Alberto Giacometti. Biographie d'une œuvre*.

My own remarks, as we shall see, are in a constant dialogue with, or even a critique of, these two texts. The second was discussed orally, following the warm invitation of Yves Bonnefoy, at the Collège de France in November 1991.

These pages also constitute a kind of test of certain propositions from a work written in parallel, and entitled *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Paris, Minuit, 1992. Dominique Boudou, Pascal Convert, Christian Klemm, Rosalind Krauss, James Lord and Margit Rowell all offered suggestions, information, or challenging questions. I wish to thank each of them very warmly.

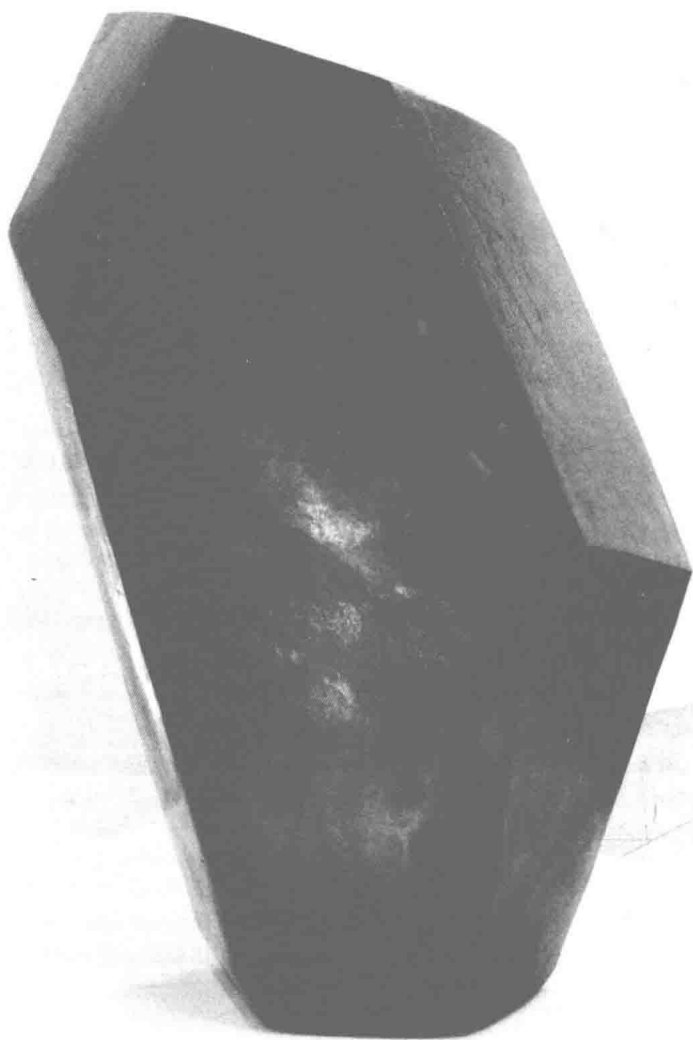


Fig. 1: *The Cube* (1934), bronze, 94,00 x 54,00 x 59,00 cm. Kunsthaus Zurich (Alberto Giacometti Foundation), photographed by Denis Bernard.

Buried Face

The *Cube*, as we can see, isn't one (fig. 1–5). It is an irregular polyhedron which catalogues describe as having twelve sides—that nice figure, twelve, a destinal figure if ever there was one, which willfully evokes Mallarmé's throw of the dice, at the very moment that the clock strikes twelve at midnight, in the dark house of *Igitur*. One can imagine that Giacometti wanted to give a unique volume² to the twelve facets—six and six—of *two cubes* added together: a unique architecture for two dice thrown, as though the risky act of throwing had additionally imposed the turmoil of the suddenly irregular facets.

There is perhaps some truth in this perception, but there is also something inexact. Giacometti did not simply double the number of sides of a die or of a normal cube merely to make the six-sided geometry more complex. The object was created in plaster probably in early 1934 (fig. 6). Much later, between 1954 and 1962, it was cast in bronze by the foundry worker Susse.³ It is far from having the exactness of an object of pure geometrical demonstration. Its planes often show a slight curve, having a certain roughness in spite of their inevitably clear-cut character, and the hand did not try to correct its numerous traces, which are either intentional or accidental, that disturb the surface. Near the anterior base, we can detect a fold, as though Giacometti hesitated to unfold that face, to break the unity of the surface and to subject it to that inevitably duplicitous operation—the complex, equivocal operation, already bearing a latency or a virtuality—of the formula *one plus one*, or of the “ $12 + 1$ ”.

Observers forget, above all, about the face which is in a sense the first and the last of the polyhedron: it is the underside, the *face that faces the ground*. It suggests to us the operation of a destinal number which leans—beyond looking downwards—towards the most inevitable, the most sinister,