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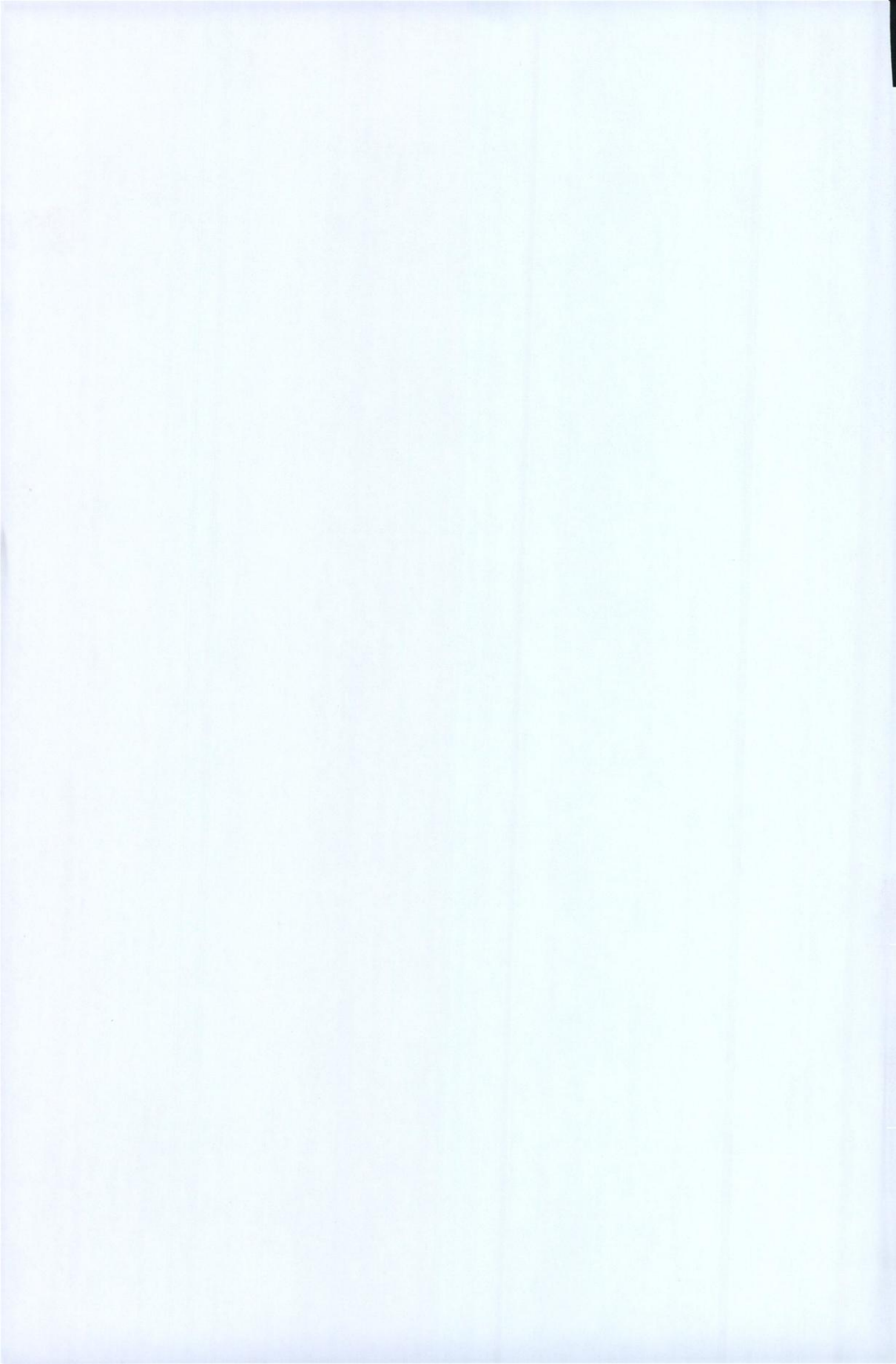
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JORGE OTEIZA: THE METAPHYSICAL BOX

By

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I hate the work of art.

*My metaphysical boxes are
the cans which have nourished me.*

*Art is not in the sculptures,
it is somewhere else.*

*What is valuable, what is indispensable
is the experience that those sculptures provide.*

"I am looking for the Sculpture to go beyond this wall that life creates, beyond this incessant dependency. In sculpture I need a free spiritual place for myself, by my side, an empty, still, far away, hard-hard place, which somehow looks outwards; a naked, protestant place, a protestant place which also looks somehow outwards, insoluble and transcendental.

Therefore I can now say that my abstract sculpture is religious art. In this concept of the Sculpture I am not looking for what we have, but for what we are lacking. In this way I go from the religious to the funerary stele. It is not a world of silence. It is the religious image of the lay absence of modern man. That which is aesthetically born as the de-occupation of space, as freedom, is transcendent like a place outside death. I am taking the name of what has just died. I am coming back from Death. What we have wanted to bury, is growing here."¹



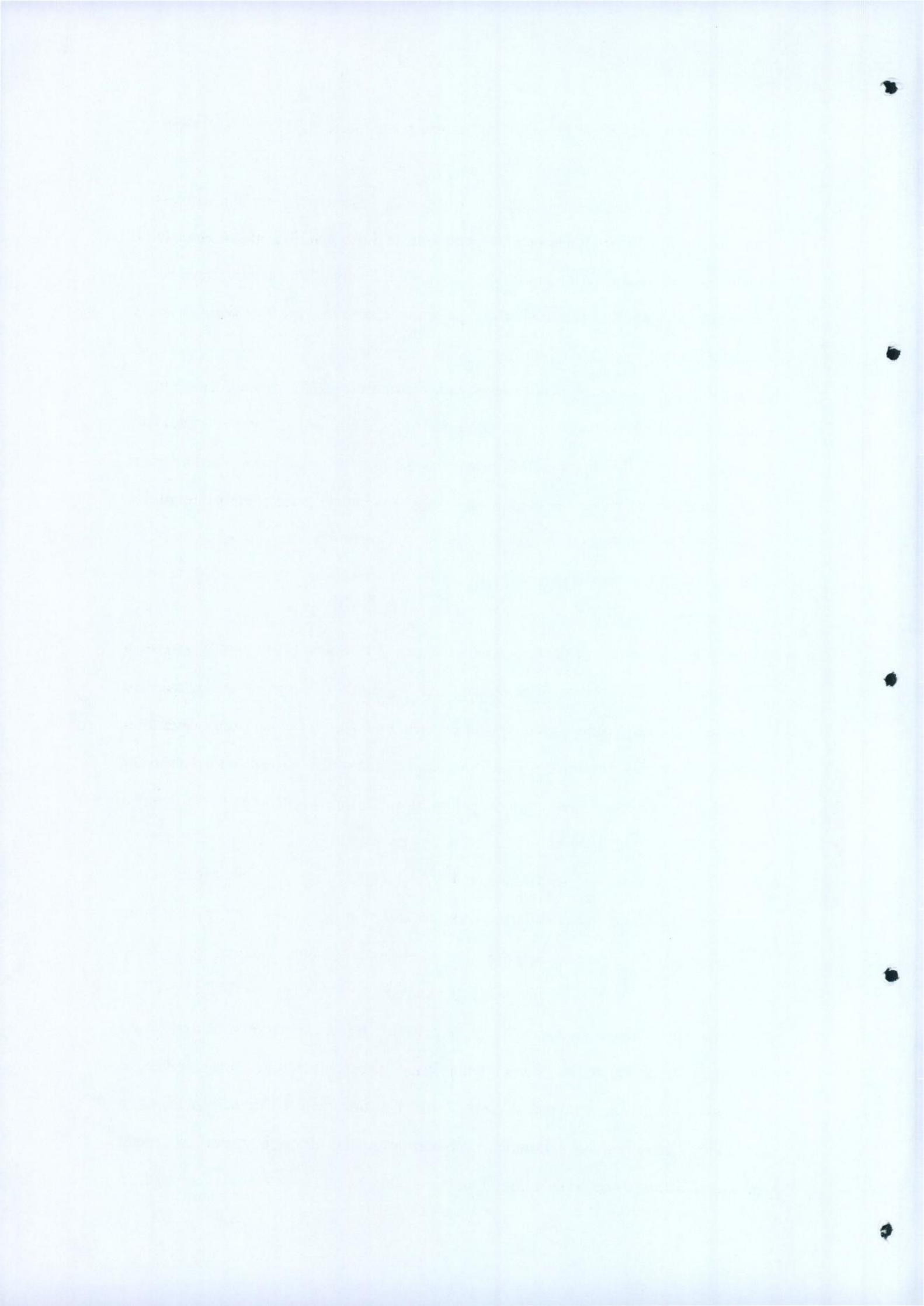
I. INTRODUCTION.

The sculpture of Jorge Oteiza is both a-temporal and modern; it could be said that it expresses a concept of a-temporality which goes with the 20th century. The formal conception and physical presence of his sculptures cannot be identified with a specific artistic movement or decade, although Oteiza responds perfectly to the new free-lance attitude that evolved in the dislocated environment of the 1930s, '40s and '50s. Oteiza places himself at a point in the process of modern art in which systematic "transgression" is no longer useful, neither in the general sense nor in the historical sense which, as Burham has commented using Duchamp's term, "short-circuits the evolution of formal change"².

From the start, Oteiza's tendency towards a search for spiritual values, which aims at rehabilitating the "religious" and ethical function of the work of art, is essential. Oteiza's inspiration springs from both modern and ancient sources. There is a deliberate reference in his work to archaic or primitive forms of art, which are characteristic of a certain current within 20th century sculpture (i.e. from Gauguin to Moore). Reductive aesthetics (such as Cubism, Constructivism and American Minimalism) are also a predominant feature. Oteiza's formal language is anonymous and reductive, while at the same time detaching itself from both these tendencies.

"Oteiza arrived at a sculptural solution which is a synthesis of the concerns of this era and a paradigm of modern sculpture"³.

His sculptures are characterised by an extreme rigour in their conception and morphology; this creates an internal dynamic and an external stability which gives the impression of a certain humanist purity, or of a fusion between human intelligence and universal order. His theoretical investigations start from the study of certain primitive cultures and from a contemporary vision of the world. During his trip to



South America Oteiza studied the religious and mythological beliefs, as well as the art objects, of prehistoric societies. When he returned, he would do the same in the Basque Country. Far from being concerned with issues of form and content in sculpture, his aim was to solve the problem of understanding the metaphysical relation between man and the universe. To this end, it was essential to understand the structure and meaning of the spiritual experience; giving it concrete form was a secondary concern.

According to Oteiza, the modern artist must attempt to recover that "communion" with the cosmic environment, in order to find forms which have spiritual and universal significance. In artistic terms, this meant creating a formal vocabulary in which inner and outer space merged; a vocabulary in which the general Gestalt, or image, could solve, or at least stabilise all the inner dynamic tensions, without destroying them.

"When Oteiza insists so obsessively on the need for experimental consciousness, he is only reflecting in a new light on the placing of the artist's mission in this new role, after the initial values of the avant-garde had been exhausted and consumed. For him it is not a question of contravening established codes, but of rectifying and finishing the path that the great names of the initial period left unfinished, and attempting to take those initial intuitions to an experimental, definitive finishing point"⁴.

The search for spiritual values and the expression of this timeless metaphysical vision was interpreted in different ways by the artists who interested Oteiza: Gauguin, Mondrian and Malevich. In his early years, Oteiza admired the pictorial formulation given by Cezanne to the geometric essence and structure of the natural landscape. He was also interested in Boccioni's attempts to merge inner and outer space into a continuous temporal space, as well as in Henry Moore's sculpture, which seemed to express a continuity between the spirit and the fullness of forms of traditional sculpture. Oteiza noticed Vartongeloo, Moholy-Nagy and Max Bill too, but in general he found their work too systematic.



Mondrian's and Malevitch's metaphysical understanding of cosmic time and space acted as an inspiration for the development of Oteiza's theoretical research and formal experiments. An example of this would be Malevitch's 1918 *White cube on white background*, which Oteiza understood as the creation of an empty figure in space, infinite within a frame. Background and figure were made of the same immaterial but vibrant substance: the substance of an active metaphysical void. He was also interested in Mondrian's Neoplastic paintings, which aimed at an understanding of the fundamentally stable geometry of the cosmic order. However, according to Oteiza, neither Mondrian nor Malevitch achieved a complete understanding of the metaphysical world. Both artists avoided the physical dimension of real space, concentrating their attention instead on ideal space; in Oteiza's mind this distanced Mondrian's and Malevitch's work from his own artistic aims.

As we shall see, Oteiza reached a synthesis between archaic and modern references, by translating certain two-dimensional sources of inspiration into three-dimensional terms. In his sculptural work, Oteiza manages to express the "metaphysical void"; his sculpture sublimates its humanity while at the same time remaining intensely human. Thus his ultimate objective is to capture the essence of the void, which he defines as spiritual and physical energy that contains within itself life, death, nature and the cosmos.

To approach the "Oteiza question" by referring only to his plastic work, which goes no further than the 1950s, and is followed with revealing coherence by an attitude already inalienable from his definitive aesthetic position, appears reductionistic to a certain degree. Joseba Zulaika and others have characterised Oteiza's artistic personality as that of the founder of an aesthetic proposition and the re-creator of a mythology. The most "ethnic" aspect of this aesthetic proposition finds its roots in the survival of that mythology. Oteiza's arrival onto the stage of Basque culture and society was a revitalising event, on two levels: firstly, through his vindication of a forgotten, though easily recoverable, aesthetic and anthropological peculiarity, and secondly by a revolutionary confrontation of the most traditional formulations of



nationalism. Oteiza contributed to the latter by tackling the problem mainly from an aesthetic point of view.

His maturity as a sculptor can be situated towards the late 1950s. In 1957 he was awarded the Sculpture Prize in the IV Sao Paulo Biennale. His work for it was accompanied by an essay: *Experimental Proposal 1956-57*. In this *Proposal* Oteiza articulated the contents of what would later become his conceptual tools, which were fundamental for the development of his plastic and vital objectives. If we consider his works functionally, in relation to his personal life project (aspirations, methods and results), the former can be structured according to three fundamental and progressively shorter moments within a 30-year span:

- 1- Search for the conceptual tools capable of defining an Experimental Proposal, 1930-50.
- 2- Development of the former, 1950-57.
- 3- Experimental conclusions, 1957-59.

With reference to Oteiza's abandonment of sculpture, Duchamp's and Oteiza's respective silences belong to different eras and have different qualities. While Duchamp's silence was fundamentally critical and ironic, that of Oteiza was fundamentally committed.

"Art is one of the highest forms of existence, on condition that the creator does not fall into a two-fold trap: that of the illusion of the work of art, and that of the temptation of the mask of the artist. Both turn to stone: the first turns a passion into a prison, and the second a liberty into a profession"⁵.

"Oteiza's abandonment of sculpture was the result of the internal logic of the language that forms part of a more ambitious existential project, which proposes a response, through critical analysis, to the objectives and achievements that the avant - garde pursued while it was disintegrating. According to this existential project, the ultimate product of the artistic operation is the artist himself, with his



sensitivity ready to cooperate with the rest of the people in political and social action: an Ethical project"⁶.

The history of Modern Art is the history of the aspirations, realities and failures of a renewal which greatly exceeded the framework of a formal dialogue carried out solely among artists; it is the chronicle, with all its vicissitudes, of that ethical project. This situation is particularly noticeable in those tendencies where there is a correspondence between such a Project and a certain formal program: Constructivism, Neoplasticism, the Bauhaus, and others, which to some extent have acted as references when attempting to situate Oteiza's work and attitude.

Oteiza found himself attracted to the rational and constructive dimensions and aspirations of the first avant-garde movement. However, during this period his sensibilities were more in accordance with the syncretic artistic tendencies of the 1930s. For this reason there was no immediate and simultaneous identification between a certain ethical project and such plastic forms. This gives rise to two moments. The first of them is intra-artistic, autonomous, from the art laboratory, and governed by an Objective Aesthetic. Here the formal submits to the logic of the artist's operations. The second moment is extra-artistic, and functions as Applied Aesthetics, which not only deal with the physical construction of a material environment, but also with the creation of a new sensibility, addressed firstly to the educator and the child. From such a procedure, Oteiza's attitude can be considered as a bridge between the avant-garde project and the latest attitudes of anthropological expansion of art represented by the influential and charismatic figure of Joseph Beuys.

After his retirement Oteiza devoted himself tirelessly to research and cultural activism, in a highly committed, critical and prolific manner. His great theoretical contribution runs parallel to the force of his words. His numerous essays on questions related to contemporary art, such as *Ideology and technique for a law of changes in art* and *The end of contemporary art* (1960) speak for themselves, as do his texts on



the problem of Basque culture and his attempts at defining what is aesthetically Basque, such as *Quosque tandem* (1963), which was truly an event in the cultural life of the Basque Country. In his books of poems and in various other texts, Oteiza recreates his aesthetic universe, and proposes cultural action projects, provoking controversy with critics and artists, as in his *God exists to the North-west*, and *Proposal for cultural violence in Guernica's defence* (1981).

Oteiza's pioneering impetus extends to several fields (music, cinema, anthropology, architecture, education, linguistics, philosophy...), always with similar purposes. Today, at 90 years of age, he continues to be devoted to his cause, disillusioned at local politics, and exasperated by the people who consent to the cultural imperialism imposed upon them by the building of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, while neglecting their own national culture. His critical attitude towards political power and social behaviour has mythically defined his personality.



CHAPTER 1

Oteiza was born in Orio (Basque Country) in 1908. As a child, he was given a staunchly religious education; he was incomprehensively isolated from his people, and forbidden to speak his own language (Euskera, or Basque). These aspects would later become defining points in his artistic evolution. Oteiza uses art as the most effective method for man to find transcendence in this life, or as what he later called the "Healing of Death".

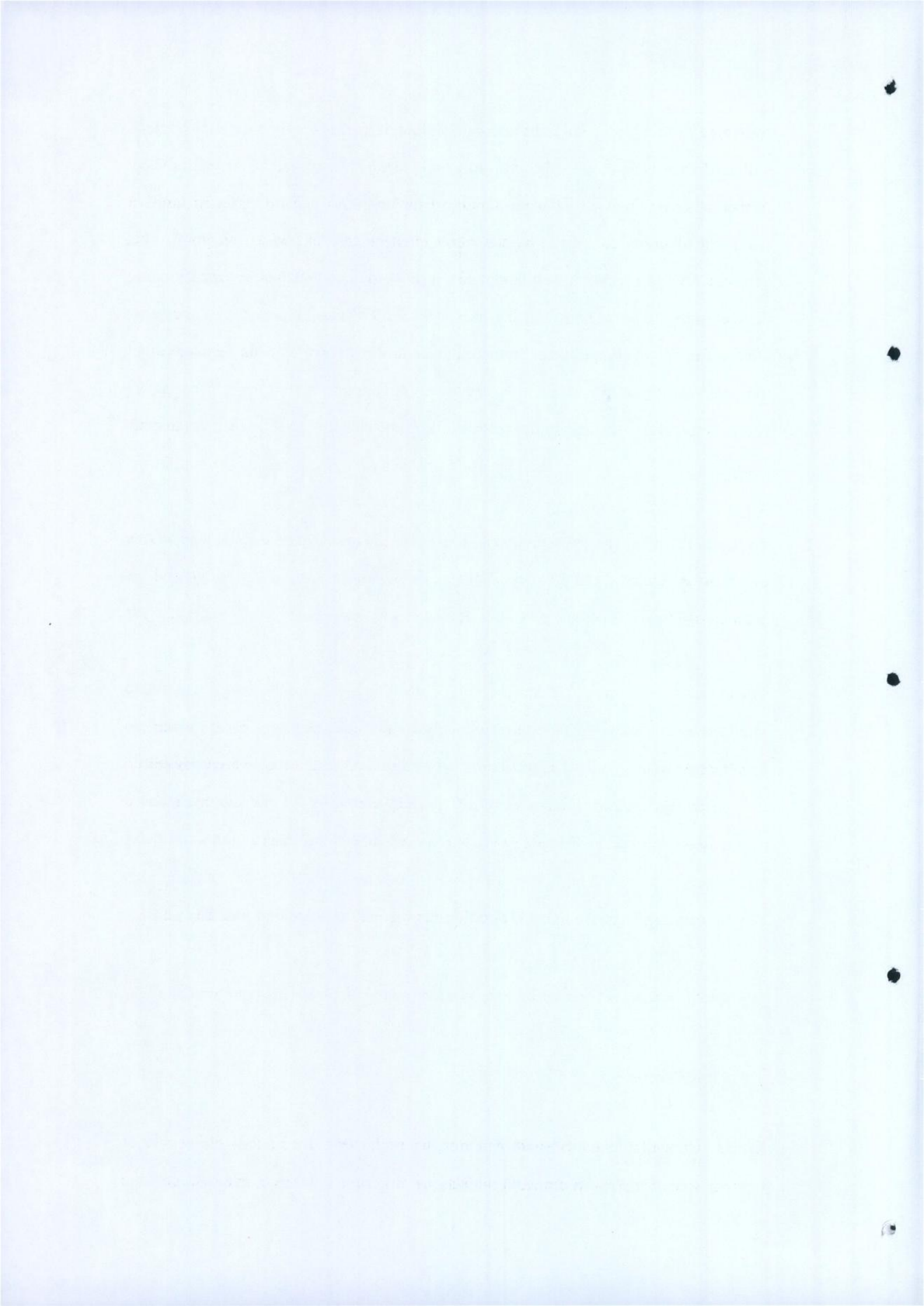
Oteiza felt greatly attracted to the craters left on the beach in Orio by trucks carrying sand.

"My greatest happiness consisted in lying at the bottom of them; I felt isolated, protected, and I used to look at the sky. My experience was that of an escape journey from my small nothingness to the nothingness of the sky which, in my desire for salvation, I used to penetrate."⁷

In the quarry in Zarauz, Oteiza used to bore holes into small stones. He found satisfaction in discovering the other free end of the hole; this was for him like the construction of a small void, spiritually breathable and liberating, which made him feel rested and secure. Oteiza assimilated these memories of his childhood as a spontaneous defence of his own privacy. He later understood these defences to be of an aesthetic nature, and associated them with the conclusion which he reached in his experimental activity: a single and simple empty space. This led him to state that ,

"Art consists, in all periods and places, of an integrating process which re-links man with his reality, which always starts from a nothingness which is nothing, and leads to a Nothingness which is Everything, an Absolute, an extreme response and a spiritual solution to existence."⁸

Oteiza refers to the conclusion of European prehistoric art in the transcendental Nothingness of the empty space in the Basque Neolithic Cromlech, and believes that



contemporary art is also entering into a discipline of silences and eliminations, which will lead to a new void. This final void will mean that art need not explore any further, since it will already have elaborated a contemporary sensitivity for life and for our spiritual behaviour, and this education must be transmitted to everyone. This aesthetic sensitivity must be understood as a religious and political sensitivity, since the reality of life, which is that of art, is a political, transcendent and religious reality. Oteiza believes in an existential sensitivity which tries to create art through incessant journeys of entry into reality and return to our range of spiritual vision, carrying the partial results of each work, until the work ends up defining itself. He finds that art education is necessary as a function of our behaviour in life, particularly within the city.

To return to his childhood memories, Oteiza incorporated these from the perspective of a healing and protective art. He emphasised the child's fear and insecurity, and the compensatory and defensive nature of the games he invents, which are revealing in terms of their aesthetic depth.

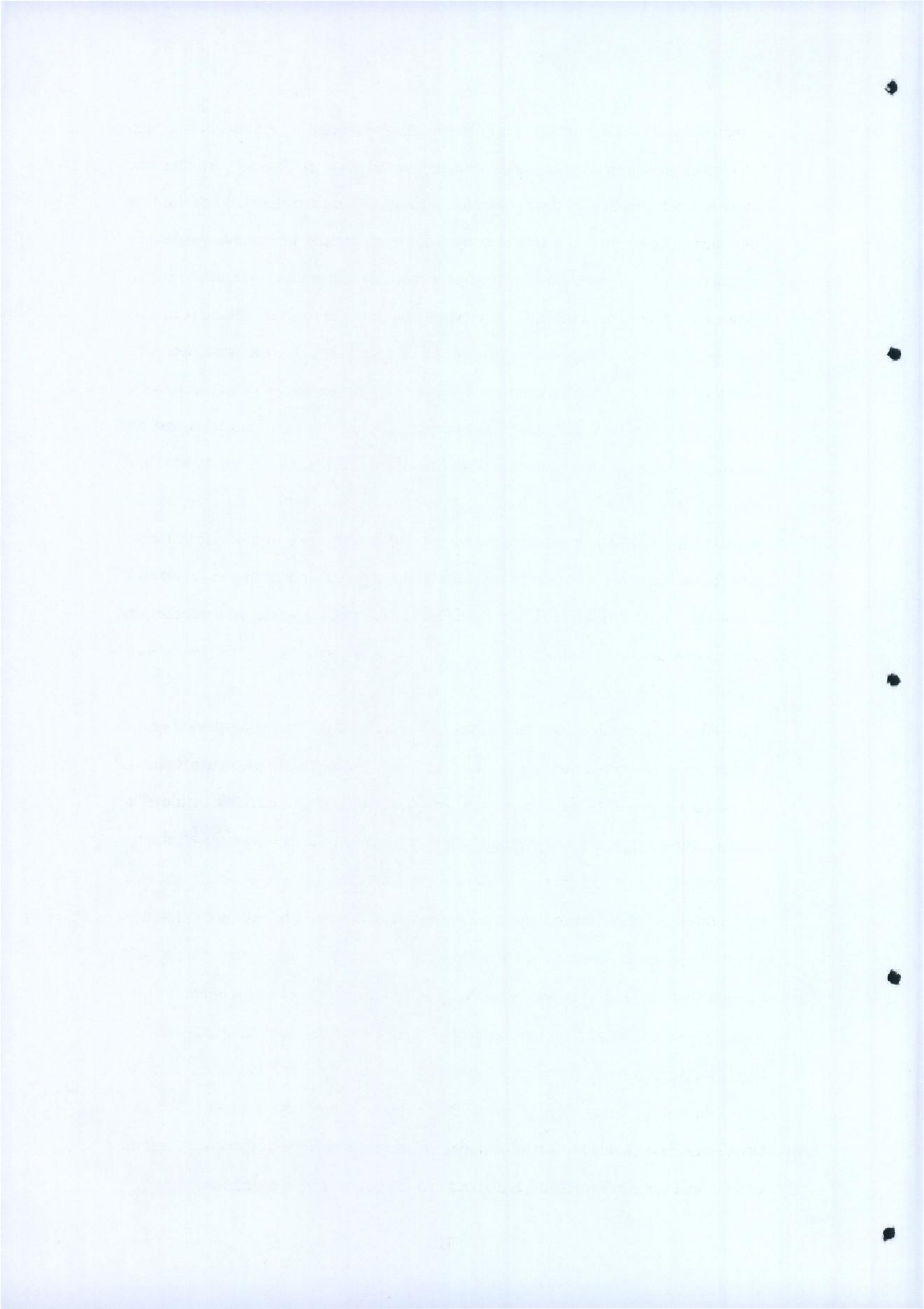
"The child who feels forced to defend himself tries to change himself, and will later, as a young man, try to change his society and his world as well.....Thus, from a political, social, revolutionary point of view, an art which protects the privacy of the individual can be singled out. This art, a kind of metaphysical realism, or existential poetry, is in my view the only revolutionary art."⁹

Why is this so? This is no trivial question, and it will constitute one of the defining points of Oteiza's doctrine:

"Because the world cannot be changed by art, but by the men who have been changed by art"¹⁰

SOUTH AMERICA

In 1935 Oteiza travelled to South America, where he settled for a ten-year period, in order to study the Pre-Columbian civilisations of Peru and Mexico, and complete the



theory of artistic renaissances which he had already started. Oteiza was convinced that certain artistic categories could be extrapolated from a specific period in the history of art to another, chronologically distant from the first; the study of the Pre-Columbian period would therefore help him understand questions related to contemporary art. At the same time he defended a prospective aesthetic, which would investigate the art that needs to be created at different times and places. After his *Aesthetic interpretation of American Megalithic statuary*, Oteiza developed his *Molecular aesthetic equation*, which is one of his fundamental conceptual tools. Oteiza's work in this period maintains a unitary character, without great expressive features and with certain primitive references. A highlight of this period is his 1935 Buenos Aires exhibition, where he gave a paper expressing his interest in contributing more clearly to humanity's evolution towards a knowledge and possession of a new aesthetic and activity. Oteiza insisted on the need for a scientific aesthetic, and it was at this point when he outlined the systematic principles of his work, in his *Report on encounterism as an opportunity for selecting, amongst contemporary production, four formal units to be combined as standard units*.¹¹

In his effort to create a sculptural alphabet, Oteiza chose the pyramid inverted on its apex as the basic identifying unit for his work. The variation, repetition, perforation, etc. of this unit allowed him to continue systematising his production, while also allowing the conceptual tools which he needed to mature. These tools were initially expressed in his text *Letter to the artists of America. About the new post-war art*. In it Aesthetics was defined as an independent area within the philosophy of art, situated at a convergent point with other types of knowledge. This issue reached its full development in 1965, in his *General aesthetics and applied aesthetics*. This Aesthetics must respond to the logic of the artistic operation, i.e., it must be an Objective Aesthetics. Oteiza questioned the syncretism of styles which up to then had traditionally been considered as investigative, such as Geometrical Abstraction and Surrealism, and called for a reassessment of the achievements of these movements which could contribute to an objective explanation of the artistic experience.



Oteiza became interested in a functional theory of the wall, from which fundamental concepts such as space, time and dimension were distilled, and which also posed an escape from everything physical, from all material evidence, in order to focus its functioning on a multidimensional spatial context.

"The section of a sphere cut off by a plane is a circumference. The section of a hyper-sphere cut by three-dimensional space is a sphere. The section of a hyper-sphere cut by hyper-dimensional space is a wall in which our proposals are explained and carried out."¹²

The wall is conceived as a fragment of a bigger composition which searches for a wholeness that must come upon it from the outside. The calculation of this composition is the artist's task. This spatial conception had an immediate consequence on Oteiza's sculptural work in the sense that, from that moment onwards, his work would be considered as the result of external action. Thus his sculpture began to find justification in something which was external to itself. This consideration forces us to understand objects from the point of view of something which, materially, they are not. Oteiza expressed this process graphically by explaining the different qualities of two types of concepts: on the one hand the Euclidian point, which needs movement to generate line, while that line needs movement again to generate a plane; on the other hand, a type of multidimensional space which, through successive cuts, generates three-dimensional space, the plane, the line, and eventually a new, static point, which summarises and has the potential for total space, and will be completely different from the Euclidian point. The concepts of dimension and time develop from this spatial concept. Oteiza treated time as something purely structural; he developed this idea in his series on the de-occupation of the sphere (1956-58), where the structure of time became, "the guarantee of the indestructibility of the aesthetic space, of its measurement and permanence.....Time is an element, a simple body which can only be found in artistic nature in combination with space, creating a chemical compound, an aesthetic durability"¹³. This concept of time was further developed by Oteiza in his



Law of changes, which consists of two phases: the first one has an expressive, spatial and temporal character; the second one attempts a dismantling of expression.

Returning to Oteiza's work, the formal unit which the sculptor had chosen as his means of expression (the pyramid inverted on its apex), laid on its side and perforated, gave rise to a series of reclining figures, which he created between 1940 and 1947. This series shares many characteristics with the works of Henry Moore, but there are also great contrasts, such as "the centripetal drive in Moore's sculpture against Oteiza's energetic and expansive tendencies"¹⁴. At this point Oteiza was focusing his spatial aspirations on a type of cavity which had nothing in common with the perforations of Moore, for whom the cavity is merely the result of a process of interiorisation of the surface developments of volume, while his interest in space is secondary. Referring to Henry Moore, Oteiza insists,

"The void must become the object of a new plastic reasoning.... The cavity must constitute a passage from the traditional sculpture-mass to the sculpture-energy of the future. From the heavy and closed sculpture to the open and weightless statue....the passage from a heavy sculpture to a weightless one is not achieved through a slimming process...A sculptor may perforate a cylinder, but he hasn't transformed its nature."¹⁵

The nucleus of Oteiza's findings in this period is the hyperboloid as a basic spatial unit. This was an attempt to open up the mass of the sculpture to its environment, to alter its centripetal drive through a centrifugal movement that would transform it. What before was perceived as volume still formed part of the sculpture, but only as space defined by a minimum of mass. This is what Oteiza calls the transformation "of the older, heavier fabric into another fabric with voids or energy zones."¹⁶

"From the cylinder to the hyperboloide -Oteiza reflects- the cavity gains prominence over volume. What is original in Oteiza is space itself, which is the substance from which sculpture starts out and towards which it is headed, while Moore still needs mass and void indistinctly, the latter being a mere



formal alteration of the volume in a figure which is still recognisable. While Moore's concept of the cavity belonged to an organic geometry, Oteiza's is already purely rational, and belongs to an inorganic geometry."¹⁷

While Moore resorts to more or less natural forms, in Oteiza the opening up of space is achieved from the pure geometrical structure which underlies those shapes.

Parallel to the development of a series of questions connected to the problem of space in the avant-garde, Oteiza also vindicated the existence of a style, a defining character of the Basque individual which had been transmitted through the centuries by popular culture and was -and is- still in force. The task now was to bring out what was hidden, to supply the sensibilities of his people with the adequate tools, towards the recovery of their own consciousness, the lack of which had led them to a neglect of their own selves. Oteiza intended to reveal the hidden face of the Basque personality not merely as a "discovery", but in terms of an authentic recovery. The Basque language, the peculiar landscape, the game of pelota, the Megalithic monuments (specially the Cromlech), the rural sports (particularly hand ball), the musical culture (Txalaparta), the "bertsolaris" (bards or oral poets)

The *Interpretation of American Megalithic Statuary* developed by Oteiza in 1952 was more than a mere scientific study in which he felt more or less involved, it was also an exercise which would later be useful in trying to determine the formal features of a culture's spirituality, finding its aesthetic paradigms and attempting to provide them with a new expression from modernity.

"There are moments in which a nation's history comes to a dead end, and stops.... Different solutions are attempted by looking through the list of traditional precedents. Foreign traditions: the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Arabs. The solution at home: the prehistoric and indigenous. By searching for the secret of our constant creative drive, we find our original soul."¹⁸



BASQUE COUNTRY, 1947

Oteiza returned to the Basque Country with his proposal in 1947; his intention was to give formal expression to an identity which rediscovered itself in this way.

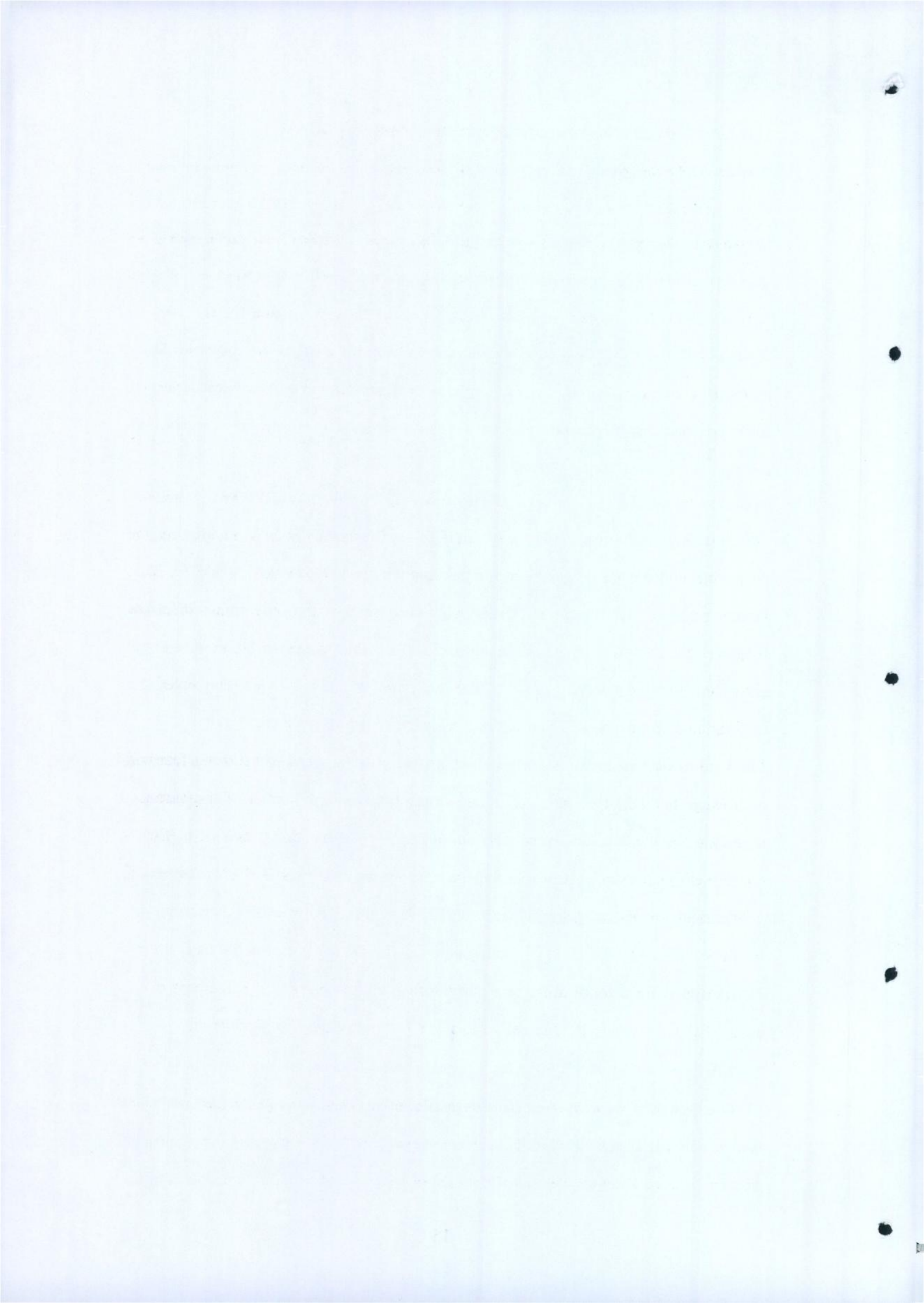
"Even if there had been no sculptors, sculpture as a feeling for space, as the conscience of the metaphysical space which exists in our tradition, is part of the aesthetic nature of our visual thought and it is in the round, with the use of space, and of the large empty spaces of our architecture's reality; it is part of our games and of our popular crafts..."¹⁹

The aesthetic sensitivity which is peculiar to the Basques has been shaped by the coexistence with these elements. In his *Quosque tandem* Oteiza aims at an "aesthetic interpretation of the Basque soul" precisely because it is the only thing about the Basques that can be aesthetically analysed: a spirit that shaped itself in an art that ended and was never perpetuated.

"Every feature or habit that we recover for our consciousness represents a psychological re-establishment of our most intimate style, it means a healing of our soul, a re-modelling of our instinct, a re-education from the standpoint of a certain attitude, of a gesture that responded to reflexes conditioned by aesthetic and normative feelings, of an existential knowledge which avoided being prostituted precisely because it had gone into oblivion."²⁰

Oteiza turned his gaze towards Pre-history:

"I believe I have finally found a particular existential situation from our Pre-history which reveals the founding moment, or one of its secret cardinal moments, of the consciousness of the self and original impetus in our culture."²¹



This "secret moment" was none other than the Cromlech. [FIG.1]

"To discover the characteristics of the original Basques during the Neolithic period we need only to summarise the significance of the Cromlech in the evolution of Pre-historic art. This can be achieved in two stages. During the first stage, art is seeking to explain the outside world, artistic expression grows and, at a second stage, it starts to decrease and returns to man, seeking self-knowledge until it enters into a silence which, if it is an absolute silence like that of our Cromlech, means that man has become conscious of its own individuality. It means that humanity before the Cromlech, oppressed by the confusion of the outside world, discovers its own spirit and, sheltering in the knowledge of this self-confidence, transforms its religious ideas."²²

The Cromlech, a formal zero achieved through the "elimination of elements which are only auxiliary to expression" represents, due to its microlithic character, a change "from the concept of the traditional monumental scale to a human scale"²³. This human scale is that of the individual whose intimate self is enclosed within the boundaries marked by the line of stones. The line of stones distinguishes, without separating them altogether, between the monument's internal space, conceived for meditational purposes, and the outer space, which is devoted to work.

The kind of man that results from this process of self-consciousness has left fear and perplexity behind, to reach confidence and reason: existential self-assurance, attraction for the big, empty spaces, and a quick style, irrational and aesthetically conformed by freedom, as opposed to the insecurity of styles based on reasoned or geometrical spatiality. Against the classical concepts of order and harmony, the Basque individual offers the improvisational freedom of the *Bertsolari*, whose confidence and control of time and rhythm turns him into one of the paradigms of the existential style which Oteiza considers to be the result of the Cromlech-man.

"If the coherence of the work of art is the result of a spatial, visual and objective treatment of the subject, then it is a work of art within the classical and Latin tradition (the artist stays within art, working for a sensitivity for life). But if that coherence is achieved through a temporal, analytical,



subjective treatment of the subject then it is a work of art within Basque tradition (the artist no longer works from within art, he has already reached his artistic conclusion)²⁴.

In contemporary music and poetry, as well as in the style into which contemporary art has entered,

"the chronological and grammatical order has been replaced by a syntax of meaning, which is what establishes the rhythmic unity and the internal logic of the Basque poem. Logical incoherence, so often found in our poetry, is the sign of its intellectual maturity. First the *bertsolari* imagines the ending towards which the river of his memory must lead, then he immerses himself into his own imagination and lets himself be carried away."²⁵

For Oteiza the right angle, geometrical reasoning and the poet who counts the syllables of his poem with his fingers, are the signs of a lack of confidence before nature, of root system which is insufficient to deal with existence. On the other hand the man who has known the Cromlech and has benefitted from its totemic and protective space does have self-confidence and dominates nature; he has just come from an art "which has fulfilled itself"²⁶, yet he will not need that art any more because he will be able to dispense with the artistic and allow his aesthetic and religious sensitivity to identify with an ethical style.

An example of this long process towards the open form of the hyperboloid is *Mother and son looking fearfully at the sky* (1949), [FIG.2] where the elimination of matter and the subsequent perforation of the statue are accentuated. At the same time Oteiza created the piece *Figure leaning on three support points*, which is characterised by the clarity with which its different parts manifest themselves, while at the same time generating a sort of spatial turbulence around itself, which marked the frontier of Oteiza's new sculptural behaviour. The latter was further defined in his work *Triple and light unit* (1960) [FIG.3]. This paradigmatic piece left Moore's influence completely behind by showing us its open and spatial character. It represented the



creation of units and the establishment of relationships at an increasingly energy-based level, while the material characteristics of the piece notably diminished.

"A work which creates a setting within which it can become visible or spatial, with the result that the real sculpture is produced outside the sculpture."²⁷

Hence there was a need for the sculpture to explain itself, to talk about itself, about its functioning and about its pragmatic character. From this moment Oteiza focused on the energy-based liberation of the sculpture as a merging of open units. His work acquired sufficient autonomy to enlarge, define and express his goals in concrete terms. At this time he finished developing his *Experimental proposal 1950-57*, which deals with the following fundamental issues:

1- Approaching the work of art from an ontological point of view, as a particular type of being which is able to defy death. What gives life or death to reality is causality. The ideal is beyond death, while the living has a fragile link to temporality. The work of art, the aesthetic being which is indissoluble in life or death, is created through the reaction amongst three types of beings. These are: real, ideal and living beings. (In his *Aesthetic molecular equation*, we can see that Oteiza emphasises structural and vital issues, discarding value judgements, such as the issue of beauty. These issues of value are part of the result, but are not ingredients in the operation.)

From a narrative point of view, the work of art is an organism, the product of a series of space-time discontinuities. These can manifest the structural moment in which they find themselves.

2- These different moments in the expressive process are susceptible to development in experimental series in an attempt to control their expression, in the intuition that apart from the different emphasis on space or time (as registers of moments which are classical, ordered, geometric or baroque, complex or fluid) it is possible to break this space-time molecule, thus beginning a diminishing process of expression. This expressive decline was to correspond in 1958 to the definition in his *Law of changes*.



For the moment the said law was to manifest itself in the different intensities with which the polar opposites of balance/imbalance, and occupation/dis-occupation would occur, towards situations which were becoming more and more static and empty.

3- Oteiza analyses different seminal situations in contemporary art. Thus he observes that the process of dissolution of Impressionism is followed by the re-instating of classicism by means of Euclidean units for discontinuity with the natural world. Cezanne had already pointed this out in his famous statement:

"In Nature everything is modelled according to three fundamental modalities: the sphere, the cone and the cylinder. One must learn to paint these simple figures, and then it will be possible to do whatever is desired."²⁸

"Modern art, both painting and sculpture, in its most experimental aspects is the intricate journey of these Euclidean elements, in their multiple variations, from the configurations starting from plane elements to the renewal of polyhedrons within the masses. both the so-called non-objective art and much of the figurative expression are in some way linked to the assertion of Cezanne : 'That man you see over there is not a man, he is a cylinder' ".²⁹

For Oteiza the possibilities offered by such elements were already relatively exhausted, and his solution was to bring them to a critical and conclusive point. Oteiza weakened the expressive character of these bodies, creating organisms which were fundamentally energetic, such as in his most important experimental series: the cylinder, the cube and the sphere.

4- The problem of the liberation of energy is analysed in the light of the different attacks carried out on these Euclidean bodies. To explain the possibility of the new liberation of energy Oteiza uses, in contrast with Moore, the comparison with nuclear energy. This reference to scientific models is continuous in Oteiza, and also common to all the avant-garde in so far as it participated in the Positivist Project, for which the only true paradigm is science. For Oteiza, Moore's procedures coincide with those of the liberation of energy by nuclear fission: the sculpture which is sufficiently heavy



perforates itself until it obtains a true isotope of classical sculpture, but not a new sculpture. Oteiza was to attempt the other system: the fusion or conjunction of weightless elements which, when they meet, create a new energetic and spatial organism.

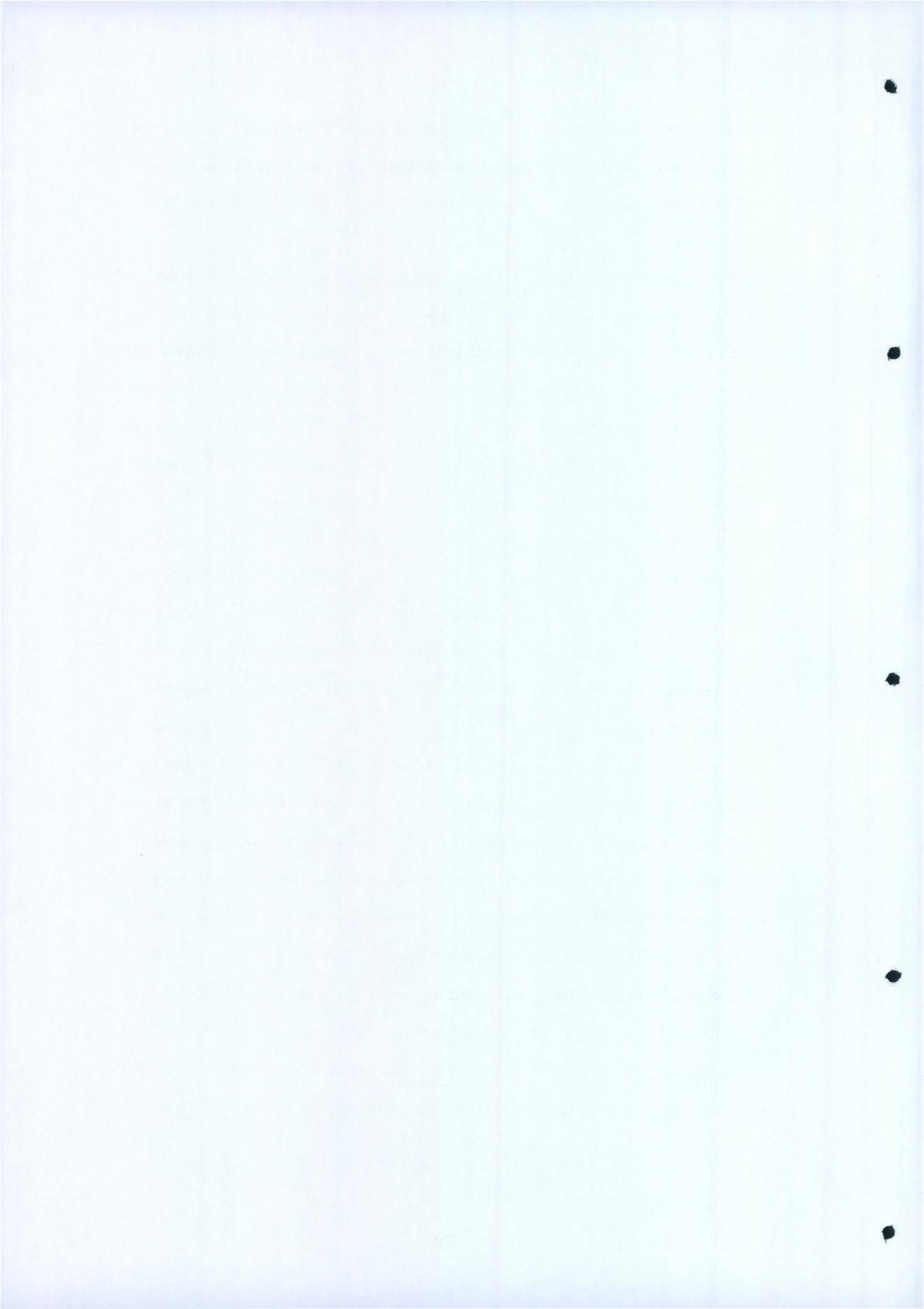
The Experimental Proposition ends up defining itself through the release of energy by the sculpture, by means of a process of fusion of weightless units (which originate in the opening up of the Euclidean bodies with whose implantation contemporary art had begun) within a process of control: of expression towards situations which were non-expressive, receptive and which were to provoke in 1958, through the definition of the Law of Changes, a conclusive process which would be endorsed by his abandoning of sculpture.

HYPERBOLOID

Oteiza's piece *Monument to the unknown political prisoner* [FIG. 4] constitutes the most important work in his series on the de-occupation of the cylinder starting from the hyperboloid.

"We have started from the hyperboloid as a geometrical unit, aware of the new concept of the universe being in constant expansion and, at the same time, as a spiritual image of the new man.... We have conceived this monument -Oteiza explained- as a simple and open articulation of the weightless formal system. The work consists of three diverging lines: one resting on the floor, and the other two standing up, like ever-changing columns which separate themselves from the earth, configuring an inner void which is the tragic and expressive substance of the monument.³⁰

Here Oteiza conceived of space as a material, the material; this being the definition of a space taken from the pure void through a conjunction of geometrical units.



"The resulting activity of the space thus obtained - Oteiza pointed out- is not achieved through de-occupation of the space, but through merging less heavy elements, which result from the opening up and weakening of the cylinder: the hyperboloid."³¹

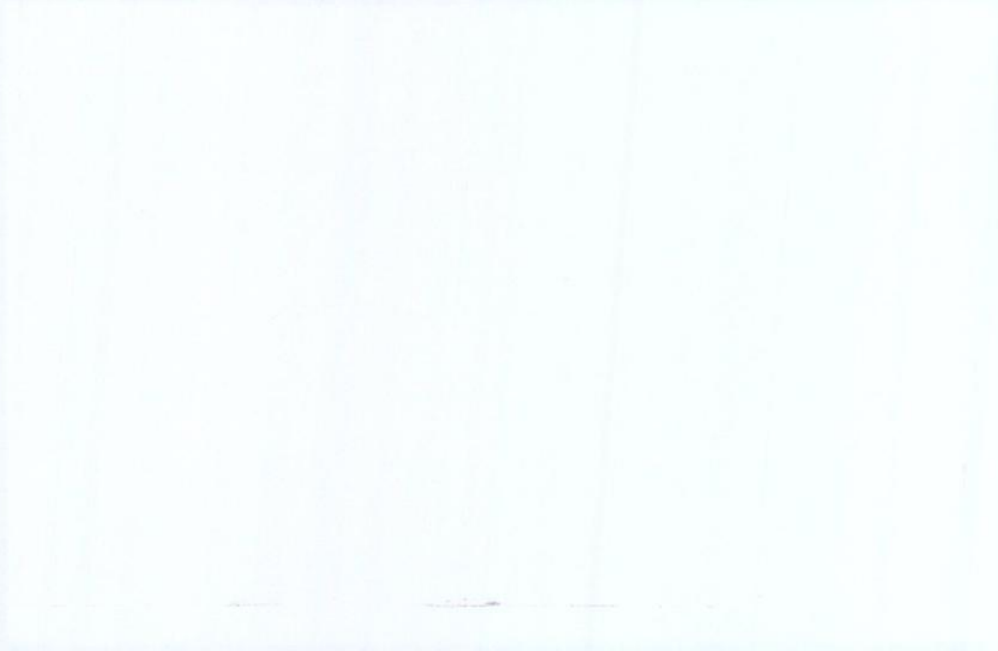
With this work Oteiza was selected for an art competition announced in London in 1952. The group of chosen artists brought together the most important sculptors of the period with old masters of the historical avant-garde, such as Pevsner, Gabo and Calder. The list of awards reveals the sculptural taste of the 1950s, as well as the state of disorientation and the feeling of transition which the art world of the post-war period was experimenting. The neoclassical post-avant-garde period would be followed by a period during which some aspects of earlier sculpture, such as transparency, spatiality, and the free assemblage of different parts would be rediscovered, while the statue as sculpture would be rejected. This was the case with artists such as Butler, Chadwick, Adams, Stankewick, Basadella, Minguruzi, Jacobsen, Smith and Chillida, the latter two being the most relevant.

In his project, Oteiza does not reject the statue as sculpture, yet he makes it yield to the uncertainties of the period. As far as the subject matter of the monument is concerned, Oteiza took the myth of Prometheus as a starting point. This demi-god deceived the Gods of Olympus in man's favour, and was condemned and tortured as a result. This was Oteiza's way of referring to the profound significance of political prisoners. From a plastic point of view, the monument coincided with a period of exploration of the problems of opening up of the cylinder. By breaking the neutrality of the outside space, the cylinder engaged itself with its surroundings. Oteiza incorporated both a gloryfying and a funerary meaning into the subject matter, from a non-authoritarian point of view, and using as his only emblem a void which is offered to the viewer from the open sculpture. This became his experimental conclusion, not only in artistic terms, but also and mainly from an ethical point of view.





FIG. 1



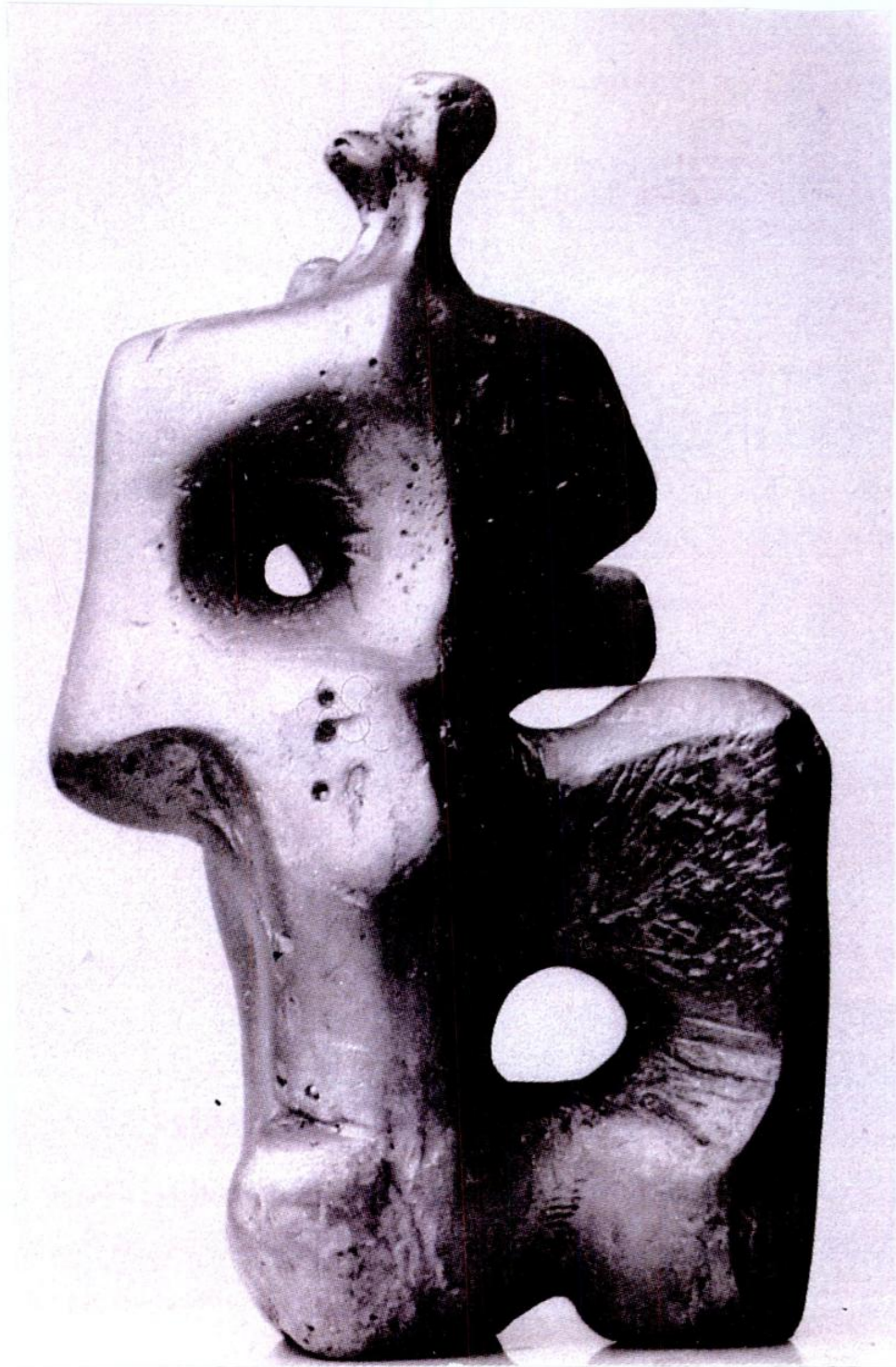


FIG. 2

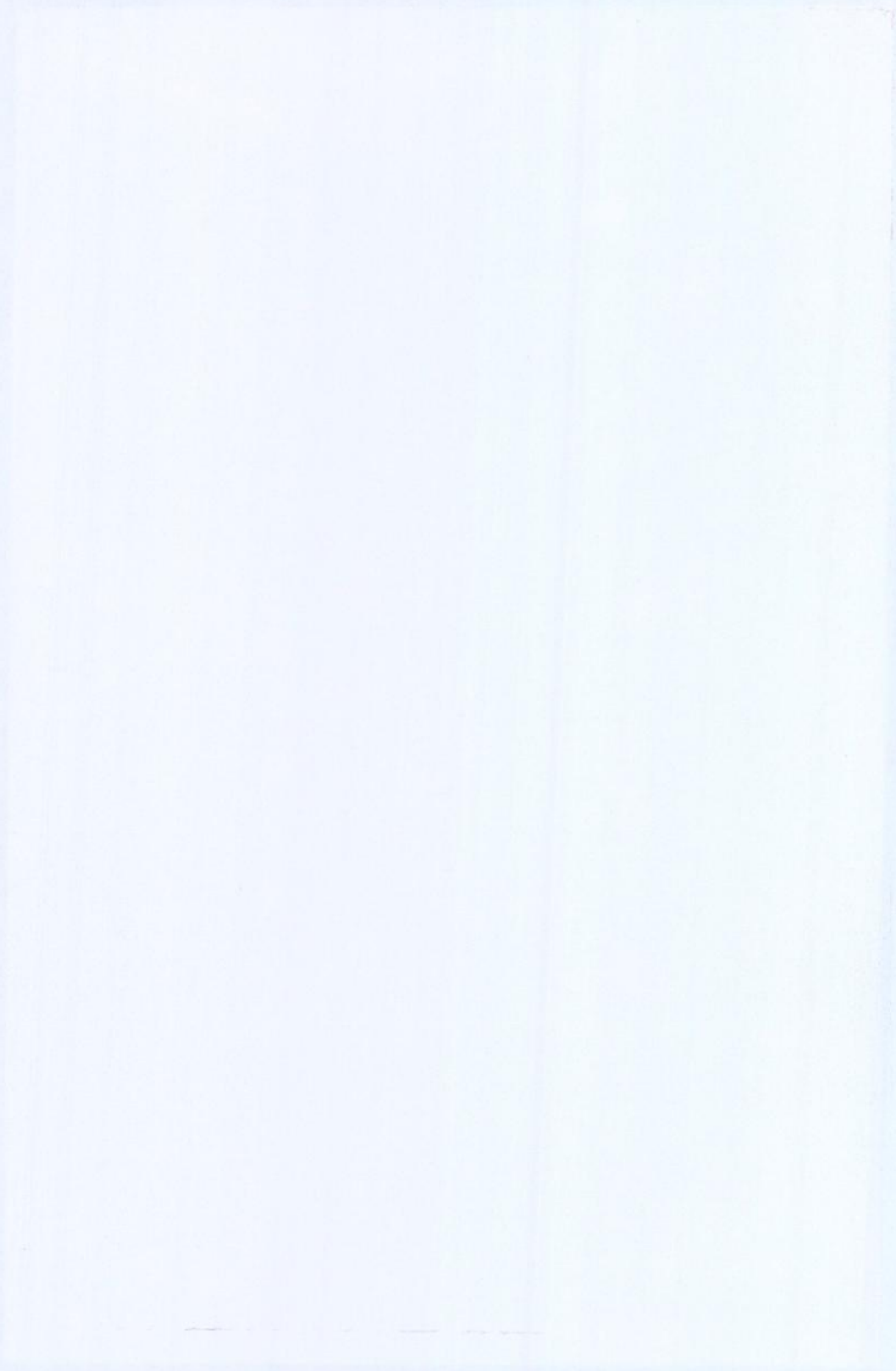




FIG. 3





FIG. 4





FIG. 5





FIG.6

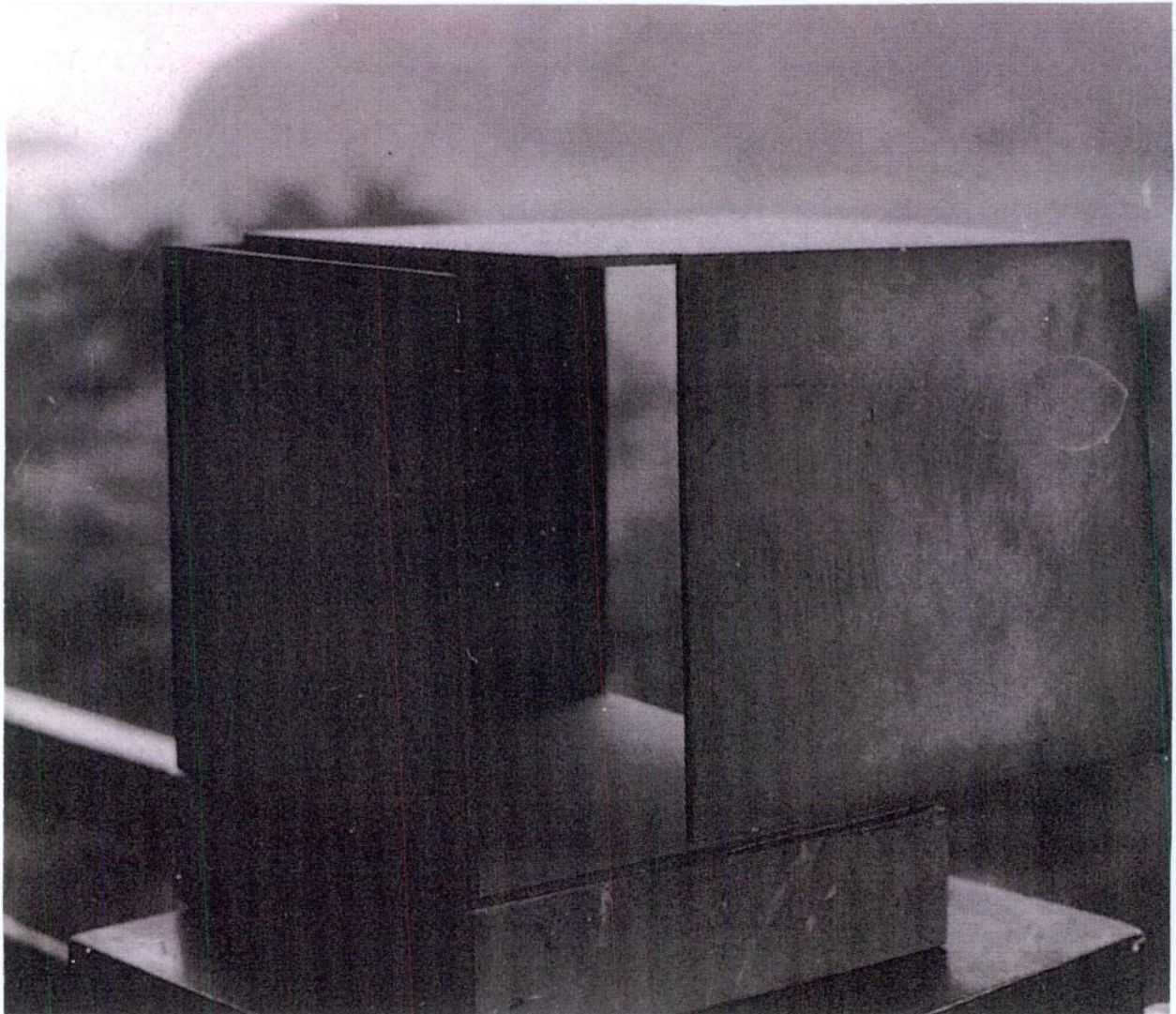


FIG.7



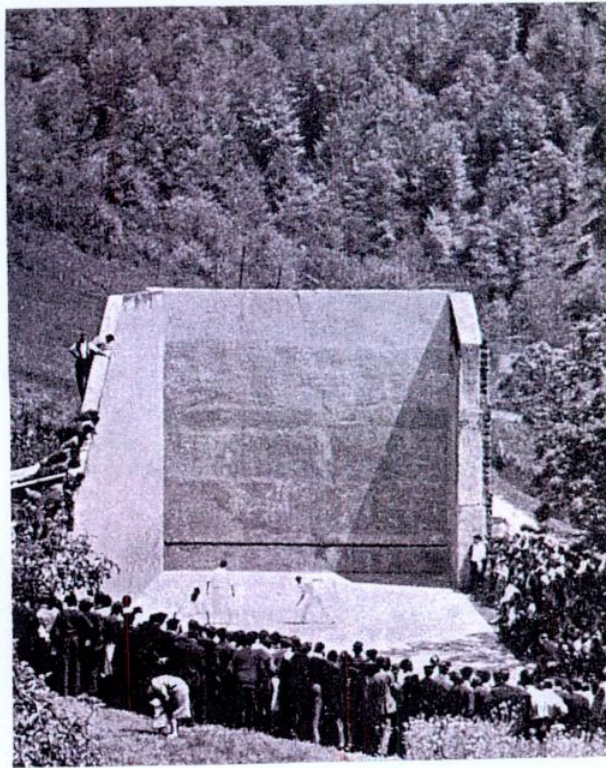
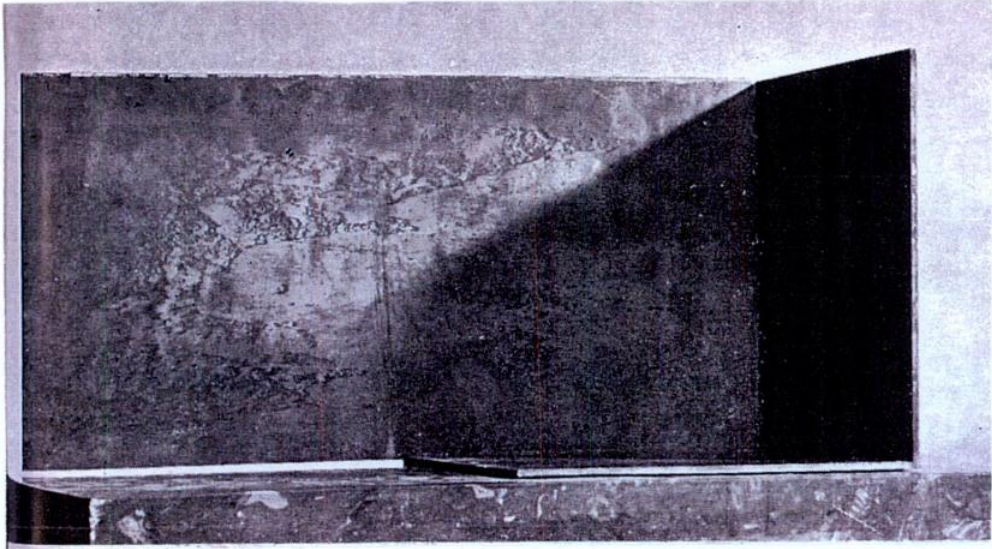


FIG. 8-9



CHAPTER 2

After the developed series, such as *The Earth and the Moon*, in which the opening up of mass goes beyond the purely experimental to become subservient to the subject matter, during the years 1955-56 Oteiza developed the natural illumination of sculpture, with a long series of perforated creations and lighting devices which question the physicality of the pieces, creating highly suggestive events.

BASILICA OF ARANZAZU

(A place of pilgrimage and, in difficult times also a bastion of Basque national feeling)

Oteiza approached this project with an aesthetic, political and religious responsibility. In the creative process that his sketches illustrate, we perceive the necessity on Oteiza's part of tackling the problem as a whole; of dealing with the project from the general to the particular, and from figurative expression to an essence of forms, in such a manner that the feeling of emptiness becomes a natural expression, as well as a physical or spatial sensation. In Aranzazu the thematic and vital character of Oteiza's work is demonstrated.

Considering the work of art as a composite of real, ideal, and living elements, at first sight the abstract may be seen as the outcome of the collision of the real with the ideal, in the absence of the living, but at a second stage we might think that this happens less often than we believe. The resonance of the subject matter for certain artists, such as Malevitch or Mondrian is such, that the abstract (at its furthest limits) leads to operations which are purely metalinguistic, such as in the cases of Sol Le Witt or Kosuth, where art becomes a discourse about itself. It can also lead to purely formalistic operations, of the type represented by, for example Max Bill.



Oteiza's entire oeuvre maintains the same vital and thematic characteristics in pieces as radically different as *Adam and Eve* (1931), and *Odysseus* (1975), which inform us of the intimate truth of the creative process, regardless of methods or tendencies.

MURAL RELIEF

For his studies on the wall Oteiza developed a technique of treatment in the negative, which takes advantage of his investigations on the behaviour of the wall as the result of a higher, multi-dimensional complex. Thus the relief is not the result of a direct and precise design, but of an operation which controls not the final image, but the elements that act upon it. Oteiza's mural investigations became the starting point for later formal deductions surrounding his discovery of the "Malevitch unit".

"The wall receives its spatial powers from the outside... The new wall must be like that, always a fragment of an open system, of a de-composed imbalance, unstable and progressively re-establishing itself in the outside"³².

Parallel to this was his research on the incidence of light on the wall, when the shadow of a relief projects itself onto it or when perforations are introduced in it. Oteiza developed an expressive use of light through the so-called "light condensers"; these allow the interiorisation of light, which manifests itself as if it was coming from the interior of the piece, introducing a new energy factor into works which are already open and spatial. His *Homage to Boccioni* was an example of this.

TOWARDS THE DE-OCCUPATION OF THE SPHERE

Up until 1956 Oteiza had worked on the theme of the merging of lightweight units originating in the hyperboloid, in his series on the de-occupation of the cylinder. The



immediate result of this was the definition of a large catalogue of usable units , as well as the establishment of guidelines based on unorthodox standards, which suggested how the relations between the parts worked. In the development of contemporary rationalist art, there is a fundamental line based on the determination of linguistic units, which work within a specific syntactic framework. Standard Neoplatonism and Suprematism, which is more transcendental, are examples of this. Oteiza follows that fundamental line: he designs his own basic units, which are neither conventional nor neutral, but functional, since the connections between them are determined by the objectives of the research. The relations between units create a context which supersedes its own material existence and manifests itself as pure energy. Oteiza calls it "a void which can be breathed by the forms". These units only participate in purely analytical, deconstructive, re-constructive and structuralist operations. He will later use them in his linguistic research into euskera (the Basque language).

"The phoneme (a unit which has no meaning until it is articulated) is placed against the 'soneme' (a meaningful particle which modifies or specifies its meaning when coming into contact with other particles)."³³

This rationalisation process affects the vital content and the "breathing" of Oteiza's sculptures very little. Furthermore, it constitutes a strategy which will help him project himself from art into other social, political and pedagogical contexts.

Oteiza's development in terms of the type of units which he uses and the relations between them is quite independent from the systematizing tendencies of De Stijl or the strictly constructive tendencies of Gonzalez or Smith; it is closer to the trend started by *Picasso's guitar* (1912), which continued with Tatlin and Russian Constructivism. There is a parallel not only in terms of the purely grammatical issues addressed by the former, but in terms of the close link that they have with a political ideology. In the 1950s, a Constructivist trend evolved which was characterised by its



anti-utilitarianism and its anti-materialism, as well as its regeneration of the social principles and aspirations that accompanied it. This constructivist trend was represented by Pevsner and Gabo. From the opposite perspective, Oteiza began a revision and conclusion of what had started there, and also a real re-adaptation of the Project which underlied it. The new vocabulary created by Oteiza allowed him to approach the experimental in sculpture in a more radical form. Through his definition of the "Malevitch unit" Oteiza started the most intense and fertile period of his sculptural work. This unit developed from Mondrian's enclosed space and Malevitch's barely-contained space. Oteiza attempted to outline a unit which received its freedom from its structural consistency, the latter being a functional response to outside space.

" A square which loses two of its right angles: the 'Malevitch unit', a unit which from its internal structure can follow both horizontal and diagonal paths, while its incompleteness, its dissatisfaction, forces an encounter, a relationship."³⁴

A whole new vocabulary evolved directly from this unit, expanded through the development of the "Malevitch cuboid", which contributed three-dimensionality to the unit. Oteiza allows himself a safer experimental play with these units, thus approaching the development of his *Law of changes*, which helped him to finish what had been started at this point in experimental terms.

Some of Oteiza's most important sculptures are the result of these experimental series, such as *Homage to Malevitch*, where Oteiza experimented with the spatial rotation of the painter's flat units. In his *Empty constructions*, Oteiza used Malevitch units in positive-negative shots, and combined them with a merging of open cuboids. These later led to another of his series, the so-called *Maclas series*. There is an interesting contradiction in these *maclas*: on the one hand the units are laid out to create a new type of solid, where the concepts of the "parts" and the "unit" are fluid, thus generating an internal circulation with a certain architectural and monumental



character; on the other hand, the opening up of the units turns the structure into a sort of matrix, within which space activates itself.

At the same time as he was working on the Malevitch units and the cuboids, Oteiza started his series on the de-occupation of the sphere. This series is fundamentally based on the problem of mobility, which is a concept that had been excessively at the mercy of psychologistic interpretations, and usages of a purely physical nature, such as flotation, suspension, etc. This series created the greatest number of related problems, such as points in movement, pressure points, empty points, hyper-spatial configurations, extensions, concurrences, etc.

In his de-occupation of the sphere Oteiza achieved a "round and empty" space.[FIG.5]
The sphere,

"is a round body, satisfied in a Euclidean sense and perfect inside, although unstable and blind outside. Its extraordinary sensitivity towards the outside (achieved without an opening) makes its dangerousness (towards the structural mobility of the sculpture) useless. Opening up the sphere is correcting its blindness."³⁵

In other words, opening the sphere meant releasing the space within the sphere in order to make its self-satisfaction cease so that the sphere would turn into a "needy" form, and establish a flux (Oteiza called it "breathing") between its interior and the surrounding space.

This series on the de-occupation of the sphere is closely linked to *Father Donosti's funerary stele*. Oteiza commented on the fascination that the circle has always provoked in the viewer:

"We know that, within the Basque aesthetic tradition, the imagination has enclosed and immobilised a whole variety of aesthetic and religious concepts about the circle, related to old behavioural experiments...Not only does the circle respond to a geometric symbolism, it also responds to the metaphysics of existence."³⁶



This fascination and this aesthetic-religious function manifest themselves mainly in the Cromlech and the funerary stele, which are monuments that the Basque cannot help but feel are the most radical part of their popular iconography. Agreeing with Oteiza, Hans Joachim Albrech points out how "images of total roundness can help us concentrate on our own selves."³⁷ Therefore the circle calls for the religious and the reflective. The circular inspiration contained within the stele is as evident in its formal structure as in its location on Mount Aguina, in Navarre. It is a circular landscape, markedly religious, which shows the Neolithic presence of several Cromlech ruins. In the circle Oteiza links the Holy Host with the ring of the sun, and particularly with the full moon, which is so much a part of the primitive religious mentality that focused the regenerative function of our moral conscience on these Cromlech circles.

The final element in the series on the de-occupation of the sphere is the *Mobile pair*, which has two versions. In the first version, two half discs cutting across one another at right angles have been welded in the middle; in the second one the welding point is dynamic and in accordance with the Golden Section, thus creating a continuous mobile which results from its structural consistency. Oteiza presented this second version at the Sao Paulo Biennale, and called it *Weightless spatial pair*. He focused on designing an auto-mobile structure, which would generate its own movement without the intervention of an external agent. This contrasted with certain well-known works of Russian Constructivism, Kinetic Art, etc., where engines had been added. Oteiza rejected the kineticism offered by Calder, in which,

"movement is not essential to the sculpture, but rather an external agent, foreign to it. Oteiza's *Mobile pair* is characterised by the structural manifestation of its instability, where the two fulcrum points search for a third one to guarantee their stability, creating continuous mobility out of their structural make-up. 'I asked myself - Oteiza explains- whether the sculpture could move as a result of its own structure, by its own decision'."³⁸



SAO PAULO BIENNALE

The international importance of this competition during the 1950s can be gauged not only from the names of the winners of the first two editions: Max Bill and Henry Moore, but also from the list of participants: Egon Shiele, the Bauhaus, Chagall, Morandi, D. Miller, Pollock, Nicholson, De Kooning, Paolozzi, Magritte...

Oteiza's entry was accompanied by an *Experimental proposal*, in which his sculptures were linked to a certain artistic trajectory and perspective. The most consistent of Oteiza's works were the series based on motion principles within the sphere. There were two noticeable trends in this Biennale: on the one hand, the experimental trend of the first avant-garde, and on the other the outlining of the minimalist object by means of the dismantling of the Neo-Sculpture of the 1930s. At this moment in time sculpture was undergoing a recycling process, which would last for the rest of the decade. The impact of Minimalism, the New Realism and Arte Povera would only be felt in the 1960s. The sculpture award won by Oteiza in the Sao Paulo Biennale was given as an acknowledgement of the dignity and rigour of his work within the context of the artistic environment of the 1950s.

FINAL WORKS

It was in Sao Paulo where the Bauhaus architect and teacher Marcel Breuer remarked on the tendency in Oteiza's sculptures to manifest themselves from within language. Gutierrez pointed out that Oteiza's sculptures

"show the processes which create them clearly, both in terms of their basic units and in terms of the transparency of the relationships between them, with the resultant neutralisation of that speech towards which every linguistic articulation seems bound."³⁹



This process of neutralisation was explained in a most enlightening manner during the execution of *Father Donosti's funerary stele* in 1958 (Aguina).[FIG.6].

"One day -Oteiza tells us- standing in front of one of these small Cromlech, trying to understand it, I thought of myself vacating my own space, and suddenly I understood the full meaning of that empty circle."⁴⁰

Oteiza perceives the empty sensation of these Neolithic signs, and connects it to his final works, and to works such as the Parthenon, the Kyoto gardens, the Gothic cathedral, Velazquez's *Maids of honour* and Mallarme's *Igitur*. These works present the viewer with a strange feeling of voidness, as well as with an opportunity to understand extreme situations through them, to understand the landmarks in the evolution of languages. They even represent purely self-meaning; it is the very nonexistence, the neutrality, the absorbing negativity of these works which constitutes their meaning.

Oteiza incorporated the second phase of the dismantling of expression to a cyclical and closed outline of alternating expressive behaviours. In this manner the *Law of changes* emerged, and was used as a tool for understanding when a piece of work was moving towards us and when it was moving away from us.

"In the same way -Oteiza points out- we can understand the relative situation in space of an object in motion through the Doppler effect."⁴¹

This conceptual tool, which had been intuited by Oteiza throughout his sculptural development, was finally outlined in 1958. At that point Oteiza felt the need to immerse himself more deeply into the process of silencing himself, of emptying himself to the limit. From that moment he considered himself to be liberated from art in its productive dimension, and ready to tackle problems in their real context, in life.



Oteiza dedicated his final works, before abandoning art, to Stephane Mallarme, who can be quoted as saying:

"I am now impersonal... a potentiality in which the Spiritual Universe may see itself reflected and may develop through what was oncw myself. Fragile, like my earthly appearance, I can only submit to the absolutely necessary developments, so that the Universe may recover its identity in this self."

These final works evolved rapidly, in a [process which lasted scarcely two years. They reflected the profound coherence of his life project and his real urgency to leave the world of art.

"Oteiza's position is that of the most centred rationalism of the avant-garde. It corresponds to the intellectual for whom language is a means, the end of which is logically to be found outside itself. It is the attitude of men in transition who want to leave 'art' and carry out an 'activity' instead. They are in search of personal protection, Sartre's 'language of right', and find themselves in an embarrassing social position from the moment they offer to society something which is not immediately recognised by it, something difficult to consume if it is not first broken down"⁴².



CHAPTER 3

THE METAPHYSICAL BOX

The tension which these *Metaphysical boxes* present between their spatial and material aspects comes from a single, simple sign. The release of their own internal space (their communication with the outside), will lead them to space which is already free.[FIG.7]

The unitary, anti-mechanistic and geometrical art which Oteiza makes offers linguistical and meta-linguistical aspects, with a certain tendency towards Minimalism. The difference is created by the tendency in his works towards a single sign, characterised by the fact that it is still an organism. The Minimalist 'this is just what it is' is related in Oteiza's works to a process whereby the more uncommunicative a piece is, the more capacity it has to suggest pre-eminent meanings in the viewer.

Oteiza ended his own sculptural development with the *Metaphysical box*. He ended his development and that of others too, because Oteiza gave subsequent expression to the plastic principles of the avant-garde and Geometric Art.

"The Geometric style used by immediately previous tendencies -he explains- should have achieved a total neutralization of expression, outlining its final nothingness...Yesterday's geometrical rationalism lacked the vision of its final objective. It stagnated into academic formalism."⁴³

Oteiza took this geometric avant-garde (from Cubism and Orphism to Malevitch's Suprematism) to its own natural development, which led to a conclusion about the void. With his *Metaphysical box*, Oteiza ended the spatial investigation which he had initiated. This also meant a fascinating paralellism between the experimental process of modernity and the evolution of Pre-historic art. Through this parallelism Oteiza intended to carry out a task of "recovery", which was recorded in his *Quosque*



tandem: Essay on the artistic interpretation of the Basque soul, originated in the Neolithic and re-established by contemporary art. For Oteiza Metaphysics is the science which asks the questions that Philosophy itself cannot formulate and answer as rigorously as it is required. Therefore the *Metaphysical box* is an aesthetic response, a solution elaborated through art, which then ends its trajectory; a "protective art, and therefore finishing", armed with the "metaphysical imagination"⁴⁴, and capable of creating a totemic monument which can end the radical dissatisfaction that metaphysics have created in humanity. An art ultimately conceived as the "healing of angst", according to Oteiza himself.

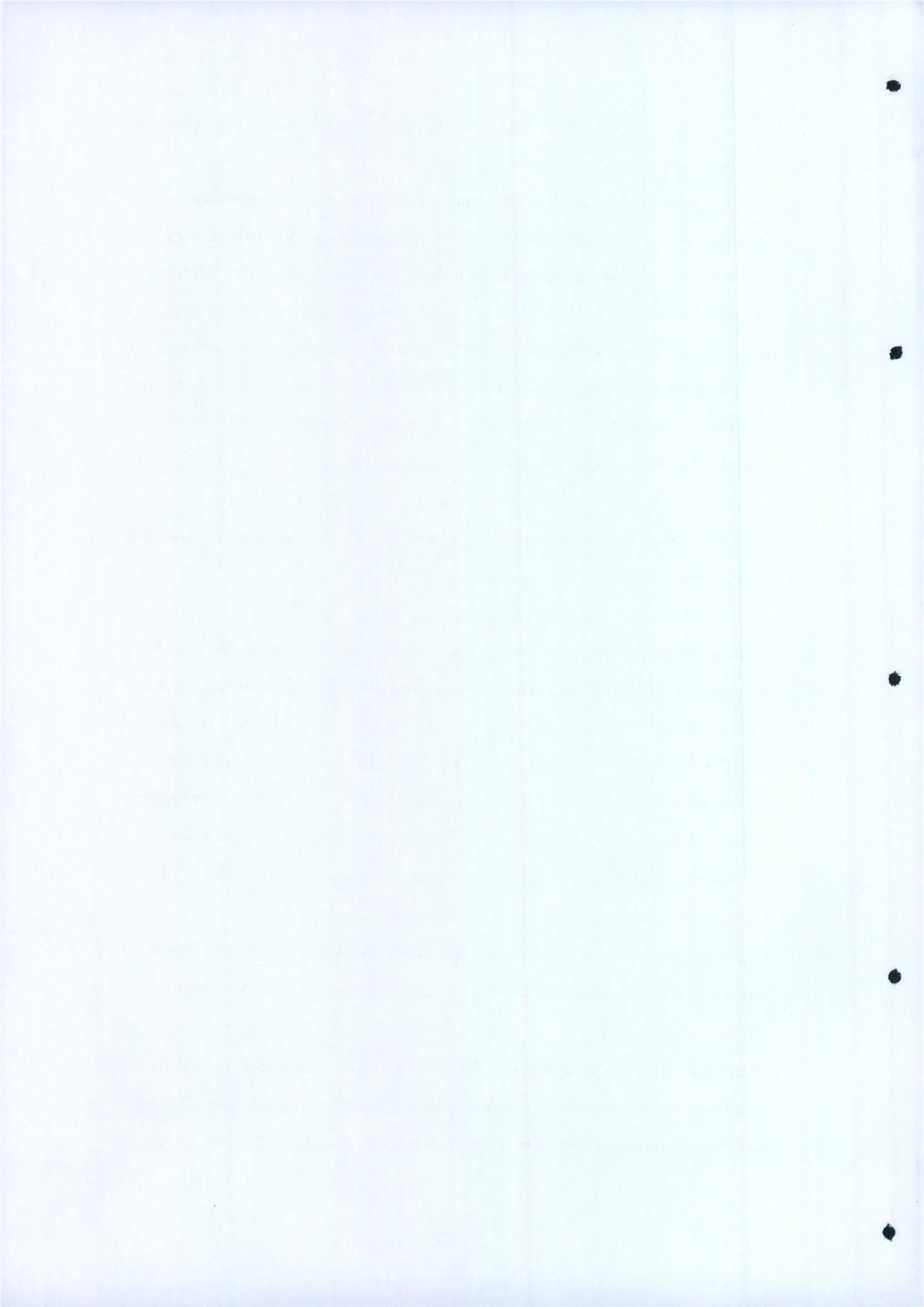
An important piece of this final series is *Homage to Velazquez*, a work that provokes a feeling of quasi-religious breathing. This piece is simply a pelota court. [FIG.8-9] For Oteiza the pelota court constitutes a formal approach between the Cromlech and the metaphysical box.

"Impeccable in its orthogonality, it provides the player who places himself inside it with a measurement of the space in which he is moving, giving him the temporal equivalent of his movements or of those of the ball."⁴⁵

Oteiza defines the pelota court as,

"an impressive enclosed space, an empty straight prism, geometrically clean, a-temporal, a church-space without knowing it..."⁴⁶

Oteiza is interested in the pelota court as a means to educate an aesthetic sensitivity and a communication with space. The *Metaphysical box* is a development of the simpler structure of *Homage to Velazquez*, where the surface plane remains incomplete as a result of opening up the cavity that allows outside space to enter the inner void of the sculpture. The *Metaphysical box* is simply a cube, which is "opened up" by different cavities through which the inner space of the box -an area which is not closed but enclosed, contained- communicates with the outside. This



communication is a testimony to the "penetrability" of this boundary, which was also present in the Cromlech.

The box calls for a reflective and aesthetic experience from the viewer, which originates in a technical, procedural effort; yet within its own structure the box endures by itself, needing nothing. Plasticity is no longer the end of the viewer's experience; rather it is only the beginning, the stimulus which keeps posing a series of questions that go beyond plasticity's own objectness. The viewer must consider the box as an unoccupied space similar to the Cromlech. Its interior is not unoccupied because it was evacuated -after having been previously inhabited- but because the opportunities for its occupation have been closed.

"Before -Oteiza stated-, the viewer had a receptive role before the object, and the object spoke to him. Now the object, by staying silent, transfers its active and interpreting role to the viewer."⁴⁷

The object becomes a stage, an empty and indeterminate space which Man must fill, and where a web of connections takes place. The box remains closed upon itself, as well as open to the spectator, like an enclosure that receives and isolates the sensitivity of the spectator. Spatiality has reached the ultimate form of inexpressiveness, parallel to that of the Cromlech. However its capacity for meaning lacks any reference to the constructive process that chooses to remain unnoticed.

The box reveals itself as an instrument for the creation of areas of freedom.

"The pairs of polar opposites that we use in our thinking -Oteiza says- such as occupation/de-occupation, continuity/discontinuity, are psychological concepts for space and time, topological categories which remain independent from the postulates of Euclidian and projective geometry."⁴⁸

What Oteiza attempts to achieve with the box is a topological space which avoids that supposedly infinite physical-technical space; a space which by retreating into itself acquires a life of its own. Gabo and Pevsner had already established a type of



geometry which was not Euclidean (since this implies a pre-eminence of ideas over phenomena), but rather "topological".⁴⁹

The box becomes what Heidegger had defined as essential for sculpture: a "materialisation of places"⁵⁰. That which precedes the sculpture is not a "place", it is an indeterminate space which Heidegger called the "physical-technical space". What follows after the sculpture is a "dominated" space. The box does not support a void, but a space. The box, which was a way of spacing by reference, is therefore a means of aesthetic education too. We know space through the box; once this aim is achieved, the box disappears. Oteiza is left "without sculpture in his hands".

With these works Oteiza ended the final phase of a process. It was not just an individual process, but rather a conclusive process within contemporary art:

"The problems with structure (which is where all the true problems of artistic validation can be found) are ending. Obviously subject matter has already ended. This must be understood, and can only be understood properly if we realise that we are concluding the second and final stage of the Law of Changes which, visibly or secretly, must govern every process of construction of an artistic language."⁵¹

The series of artistic proposals that emerged from Oteiza's statements belong to a kind of art that, in the absence of subject matter or structural problems, turns into itself; an art about the discourse of art, which in its deconstructing effort finds its own dissolution. Bernard Venet's monosemic options and the tautologies of Kosuth, Weiner and Art and Language fall within this category. At the same time there are other trends, characterised by their temporariness, and their need to break into the living space, such as Fluxus, Body Art, Land Art, etc. Oteiza considers the conceptualism of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the later reactions to it, as symptoms of the political and ethical failure of the process which was started by the historical avant-garde; it was almost like a need for art to self-perpetuate.



"Conceptualism also tried to free itself from the object and replace it with the action as pure perception. But they believed in the aesthetic neutrality of reality; they believed that nothing was aesthetic since everything already was so. The only thing that was left for the artist to neutralise was art itself, the trade of mere production by elitist artists dominated by consumerism. The conceptual artist returned through that very same door through which previous artists had left, and pretended to be leaving the art galleries behind, in favour of the world of reality, which previous artists had experienced. Then, they cast the residues aside, metabolisms of reality itself, like innocent plunder, like the process, the reflection or the litter of art parcelled up and captive again. Aesthetics ends up as an ethical norm of conduct, as a behavioural religious sensitivity. It is not mere coincidence that the maturity of contemporary art should happen at the same time as the religious crisis of man and his distancing from the religious, because what man is searching for and tries to renew is not religion, but rather religious sensitivity, which is rooted in the aesthetic and made and restored by art."⁵²

ANXIETY AND PROTECTION

In his theory on the origin of art, developed in *Abstraction and Empathy*, Wilhelm Worringer stated that the deepest source of artistic creation were man's anxiety and fear. Oteiza also searched for,

"a spiritual solution, in strictly visual terms, for this general disease, the anxiety which comes from the insecurity of our existence."⁵³

"Human beings -Giedion concedes- provided themselves with specific tools to counteract the invisible cosmic forces."⁵⁴

The protective space of the Cromlech was one of those tools; a space in which the negativity of the void had been transformed into religious and aesthetic affirmation; an empty space which put boundaries and pointed towards the nothingness. Thus the individual started to be conscious of its own self, thanks to the command over reality



provided by such a space. Art would be the "treatment for that existential angst"⁵⁵ and would end as soon as protection had been procured. The Cromlech constituted precisely the birth of man into a new condition, a higher cultural stage, with demands of a spiritual order. Malinowski understood the term "culture" as the work of man, and a means through which man attains his aims, (a means that gives him power and places him in a position to create goods and values which exceed his animal and organic reality), which must be conceived as a means to an end."⁵⁶

Oteiza considers this "individual" who has become conscious of itself as "freedom over nature"⁵⁷, the arbitrariness of which was dangerous for the spirit; it is also in nature that we find that anxiety mentioned by Oteiza.

"Only in the imbalance between the spirit and nature can the tragic sentiment be found."⁵⁸

SEMANTICS AND AESTHETICS

For the linguist an empty mark turns into a sign.

However, what sort of reality is that of the empty circle in the Neolithic Cromlech?

Is it an empty mark or is it a sign?

From the point of view of Oteiza's aesthetic analysis, the Cromlech is a purely metaphysical construction, a symbolic and spiritual construction whose function is to transmit to us a sense which requires a semantic investigation of language. Oteiza believes that there was a metaphysical culmination of the process of Pre-historic language in European art, which allowed *Euskera* (the Basque language) to reach a complete and definitive structural maturity.

"Just as we think through words, and without language there would be no thinking, neither would there be any highly abstract language without the previous abstraction provided by the more elevated language of art."⁵⁹



In 1961, Oteiza researched linguistics from an aesthetic point of view, in order to establish correspondences between the Neolithic Cromlech and *Euskera*. Oteiza started from the aesthetic conception that the spiritual nature of the Cromlech would explain the spiritual wealth of the Basque language.

According to Oteiza, the artistic process of our Pre-history ends with the Cromlech. As far as its relation with *Euskera*'s evolution is concerned, Oteiza situates the root that corresponds to the words for void, cavity, and round (which are defined in the Cromlech) in the Neolithic period. In this manner, the enrichment of the language would be linked to the metaphysical concepts of spiritual independence before the world, discovery of a personal, intimate consciousness, feelings of spiritual protection, and also of enlargement (duplicity, polarisation) of terms or designations already in existence. Oteiza gave the following example: the word "uts" means "empty", but also "pure", and this second, "enlarged meaning would be impossible without the empty, isolated and sacred presence of the Cromlech."⁶⁰

BERTSOLARI

Oteiza considers *Euskera* as the tool of Basque thought, which has stagnated because we have ceased to think for ourselves, provoking the loss of our style and our inner ear. The *bertsolari* is the only one who still maintains that inner ear; he is our oral popular poet, who defines our literary style through his poetry. The *bertsolari* learns from memory, and that is where the educated style of the higher culture which his language and his style produced can be found.

"The *bertsolari* is the opposite of the author who writes in a 'cultivated' style, copying the alien classical culture borrowed from French and Spanish."⁶¹

The *bertsolari* is the only one who understands from poetic instinct and who spontaneously takes *Euskera* as a tool designed to be used in an exact creative equation. Oteiza states that our true race exists within the language



"it is even further inside, and there is where our mental universe can be found."⁶²

In order to define that mental universe Oteiza refers us to the mental style which can be observed in the *bertsolari* in all its complex naturalness: a style which,

"defrosts the inner consciousness, and deposits its sediment outside; a style which is a sort of return journey during which life consciousness, the word, and expression irrationally re-appear. His technique aims at revealing; when we are before the *bertsolari*, he seems to disappear into an inner reality from which his words spring. It is as if he was walking backwards towards the sea, and when he had immersed himself completely into the water, he kept talking to us with that rhythm of the sea which arrives at the beach in waves, immersed into that infinite void of the Cromlech of inner water, as if he was recovering things from inside our soul for us."⁶³

The *bertsolari* recites with a continuous rhythm, which appears to be incoherent, but has a linked, continuous, free style, which it is not necessary to reason; he reiterates verses without repeating them, in a succeeding, long, flat, slow, brief, elliptical, 'siliptical', topological, changeable, fluid, antiphonal, automatic, reversible style...

"which has a mobile and irreparably natural direction. Here the style really is the man; here is where the true language of our own language is found, like an inner structure in which all our consistencies coincide and must be explained, until it is necessary to research everything more deeply."⁶⁴

The man who has lived 'inside' knows that grammar is academic, it is only a resource. The poet who lives inside the words is no longer there when the grammar is formulated. Oteiza proclaims the existence of a style which is aesthetically and traditionally definable as Basque, even if the writer is writing in Spanish, his style, in all its purity, can be a Basque style.



"In our style time linked to expression plays a small role; what matters is the freedom of the inner time of a man who listens to the silence, always looking out from the edge of his Cromlech-void, in his personal circle of solitude."⁶⁵



CONCLUSION

All the Oteizas (the sculptor, the poet, the linguist, the architect, the pedagogue, the conspirator) can be summarised into two: the sculptor and the politician. As in his *Law of changes*, but inverting the movement, Oteiza as a sculptor is a concave character, withdrawn into himself, who finds his own intimate self in a religious way, until he finds fulfillment in the silence and solitude of the void. On the other hand, Oteiza the politician is convex, incomplete; he needs others ("my family", he often says) to mobilise into action. Both Oteizas succeed and justify one another. Oteiza cannot conceive the possibility of participating in a responsible way in public life, without the spiritual apprenticeship that artistic experience provides. Equally, the artist who, resisting his natural development, stays with the artistic activity forever, is for Oteiza an eternal adolescent.

"I am astonished at the false prestige which the productive-creative old age currently enjoys, this general fall of the artist into his ultimate alienation, the selfish alienation, the alienation of the very tool which should un-alienate: the artistic product."⁶⁶

Oteiza insists that the artists of today should understand and accept that art has already merged into real life, with everything else, and therefore the role of the artist is not that of influencing with his art, but with his life; his feelings should no longer be artistic, but revolutionary.

From aesthetics to ethics, and from the object to the spirit. The *Metaphysical box* is the ultimate negation of a deconstructive process which only Man can carry out. It is the receptivity presented by what provides the viewer with an active role. Oteiza gives us to understand that the object can in no way impose itself upon the viewer.; therefore that sort of 'inexpressiveness' is not just the result of a negative aesthetic, but the affirmation of the action to the detriment of the object. If the silencing of the



object is definitive, this is because it is also conclusive, i.e. the meaning that the object points out remains and survives beyond its immediate physical presence. Oteiza's proposal of a Cromlech-art is the fencing in of nothingness, of a space opposed to the sculptural mass, where the nothingness displaces the mass and takes over entirely.

The genesis which closes the dialectical process in the *Law of changes* is a void, which acquires a metaphysical dimension for Oteiza. In this manner the sculpture, stripped of all material traces, is at the same time metaphysical. This genesis of a process which ends like this is the fruit of what Oteiza calls "a long struggle against the world from childhood". In his childhood experiences Oteiza discovered the anxiety-healing properties of quietness, solitude and silence. He related these concepts to the void and the Cromlech.

"A Nothing which is Everything, an Absolute as an extreme response and the spiritual solution to existence."⁶⁷

The Cromlech was a testimony to a spiritual reality which only art can reveal, and which Oteiza announces as,

"The reality of art which identified itself with nature was a lack of communication with reality."⁶⁸

For Oteiza silence was described and made visible for the first time in,

"our absolute creation (detached from everything: abstract) of the Neolithic Cromlech."⁶⁹

In his linguistic research Oteiza pointed out the word *uts*, which means "empty" and "pure" in Euskera, and suggested that its double meaning had been a spiritual gain of the Cromlech.



In *Quosque tandem* Oteiza stated that

"The true value of life must be found in an eternal order which accepts no changes. In that instant, having fulfilled its function, the work of art extinguishes itself, and its sacrifice reveals the common roots of art and religion, the identification of the aesthetic sensitivity with the religious sensitivity."⁷⁰

Sculpture by itself means nothing to Oteiza, it has no value; what is valuable is the experience gained. The elaboration of the complex world of the attitude, knowledge and effort that the artist brings into action is achieved by the artist's consciousness, not by sculpture; this consciousness conforms the new man in whom Oteiza insists. This consciousness is

"an existential sensitivity (conclusive, post-experimental), a formula and an instinct for life, in which action and thought merge instantly."

Once more sculpture will help us to understand:

"In a certain sense -Oteiza says- all true sculpture is original. It has no family, no history; it creates nature rather than originating from it."

Oteiza has always been interested in Heidegger's philosophy; yet his peculiar concept of art is the reverse of Heidegger's; while Heidegger proposes transcending metaphysics, Oteiza wishes to reveal the transcendental self, the metaphysical sublimation of the world. When Heidegger talks about *spacing* (i.e. freeing spaces for man to inhabit), Oteiza on the other hand proposes vacating, silencing, uninhabiting and sacralising space. The relevance which the materialisation of things (the aperture of time during events, an approximation) has for Heidegger, Oteiza finds in the elimination of time and matter, in infinity, in remoteness.



Oteiza's philosophy of the void and its religious meaning is so ancient, which can almost be considered as conventional. Oteiza's aim is the search for the essence; he wants to find the sanctuary of those basic principles which make art, as a reflection of nature, into something necessary. Oteiza has an impulse towards the universal, towards an intuition of infinity which is proclaimed by his works and by his conduct.

"Just as it happens with a tree, a man, a house, my first sculpture emerged from a hole and, like life, like everything finite, my first sculpture ended up in a hole, one sculpture within another, and the sculpture keeps returning over and over again: the artist, the man, one within the other. I ask myself why it keeps on returning, and what I think about art being closer or further away from others.

I am sorry that this is not the time to be an artist; it is a time for having been one, for everyone to have been artists. I am ashamed of so much faith in art and in man for nothing."⁷¹



END NOTES

- ¹Oteiza, 1995, p.30.
- ²Bruham, 1971, p.72.
- ³Fullaondo, 1977, p. 72.
- ⁴Fullaondo, 1977, p. 78.
- ⁵Octavio Paz's reflections on Duchamp's retirement from sculpture. Paz, 1968, p. 12.
- ⁶Fullaondo, 1976, p. 52.
- ⁷Orozco, 1978, p. 36.
- ⁸Oteiza, 1994, p.77.
- ⁹Orozco, 1978, p. 40.
- ¹⁰Orozco, 1978, p. 40.
- ¹¹Fullaondo, 77, p. 102.
- ¹²Oteiza, 1944, p.3
- ¹³Fullaondo, 77, p. 121.
- ¹⁴Uriarte, 1951, p. 112.
- ¹⁵Oteiza, 1988, p. 219
- ¹⁶Oteiza, 1988, p. 220
- ¹⁷Barano, 1983, p. 112.
- ¹⁸Oteiza, 1983, p. 290.
- ¹⁹Orozco, 1987, p. 125.
- ²⁰Oteiza, 1983, p. 107.
- ²¹Oteiza, 1984, p. 90-91.
- ²²Orozco, 1987, p. 78.
- ²³Oteiza, 1983,(unpaginated point 45.)
- ²⁴Oteiza, 1983, p. 124.
- ²⁵Oteiza, 1983, p. 129.
- ²⁶Oteiza, 1983, p. 114.
- ²⁷Fullaondo, 77, p. 221.
- ²⁸Cezanne, 78, p. 55.
- ²⁹Oteiza, 51, p. 27.
- ³⁰Oteiza, 1988, p. 223.
- ³¹Oteiza, 1988, p. 223.
- ³²Oteiza, 1944, p. 219.
- ³³Oteiza, 1994, p. 39.
- ³⁴Fullaondo, 1977, p. 302.
- ³⁵Alvarez, 1983, p. 210
- ³⁶Alvarez, 1983, p. 212
- ³⁷Alvarez, 1983, p. 212.
- ³⁸Alvarez, 1983, p. 240.
- ³⁹Gutierrez, 1990, p. 35.
- ⁴⁰Oteiza, 1983, p. 124.
- ⁴¹Oteiza, 1944, p. 144.
- ⁴²Fullaondo, 1979, p. 190.
- ⁴³Oteiza, 1983, point 84.
- ⁴⁴Alvarez, 1983, p. 225.
- ⁴⁵Oteiza, 1983, p. 59.
- ⁴⁶Oteiza, 1984, p. 464.



- 47 Oteiza, 1983, p. 85.
48 Oteiza, 1983,(unpaginated point 90).
49 Argan, 1975, p. 546.
50 Heidegger, 1981, p. 57.
51 Oteiza, 1963, p. 72.
52 Oteiza, 1983,p.201
53 Oteiza, 1983, point 95.
54 Giedeon, p. 32.
55 Oteiza, 1983, point 85.
56 Malinowski, 1981, p. 75.
57 Oteiza, 1983, point 95.
58 Malinowski, 1981, p. 30.
59 Oteiza, 1988, p. 223.
60 Oteiza, 1988, p. 223.
61 Oteiza, 1963,p.77.
62 Oteiza, 1963,p.74.
63 Oteiza, 1963,p.50.
64 Oteiza, 1963,p.82
65 Oteiza, 1994,p.172.
66 Zehar, 1998,p.15.
67 Oteiza, 1963,p.77..
68 Oteiza, 1963,p.74.
69 Oteiza, 1963,p.77.
70 Zehar, 1998,p.15.
71 Zehar, 1988,p.15-16.



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