

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDRÉ MASSON

Carmine Benincasa: What is writing?

André Masson: Writing is freedom. It is the continuation of automatism. Writing is the work. The work doesn't come after the movement and it isn't the result of the movement - the work is the movement. This is why I prefer the philosophy of Heraclitus to Parmenides.

C.B.: What is surrealism?

A.M.: To me, surrealism is automatism, the immediacy of sign. Surrealism is rage, fury and turmoil. When you see turmoil in a work, then the

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work is surrealistic. I'm sorry to appear so immodest, but I was the first to do automatic drawing. I was the one who got it into Breton's head that surrealism was the freedom of automatism. And in the same way, I was the

one who got Breton to understand Miró's work. I was there when Breton first saw Miró's paintings. He despised them, thinking them a game, too much like children's drawings.

C.B.: Why did you break away from Breton?

A.M.: Ha, ha, ha! Breton was a tyrant, a factious group-leader, a dictator. He was always trying to impose his choices on the group - all the time! In his little notebook he wrote down the names of who you could talk to and who you couldn't. Breton loved the image. That's why he couldn't understand the freedom of painting. He had the visual education of a *pompier*. That's why he liked Dali. I left because I couldn't live with the sickly, academic illusionism of the second Surrealism, nor could I take the mistaking of visionaries for surrealists.

C.B.: What do your writing works mean to you?

A.M.: My writing works prove that, the sign lives free from reason. Descartes was bad for France. The Cartesian *esprit de géométrie* suffocated even the greatest possibilities Western thinking had. Pascal managed to limit the harm done by Descartes by giving importance to *l'esprit de finesse*. But Pascal is the French thinker who bordered closest on mysticism - without being a mystic himself! There has never been a French mystic. And that's why France doesn't understand, that's why France is more attached to the

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figurative works of my surrealist period. Ever since my youth I have been raised on readings of German, Spanish, Italian, and Flemish mysticism. I was further influenced by readings from German protoromanticism, especially Novalis and Hölderlin, in addition to having read all of Nietzsche. Now here both the romantics and the mystics declare the freedom of imaginative and symbolic thinking over the limits imposed by reason, which deals exclusively with proof provided by reality. I've never loved mathematical reasoning. When I went to school I couldn't do a single Operation of multiplication, not to mention subtraction. I may have managed to do a bit of addition every now and then. I went to school until I was twelve, and from then on I studied on my own.

You have to be careful with reason. Reason can be very dangerous. The exalted Reason of the enlightenment was meant to consecrate a patrimony of extremely important values, but exasperating reason seen as an absolute in itself is of the greatest danger to mankind.

Suffocation of the spirit leads to all kinds of totalitarian violence. In their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. Adorno and Horkheimer saw this well. This is why even though I was formed and educated along the lines of cubism, I had to violently refuse it. My sign is a sign that, as you yourself laid in your article, tends to capture the

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emptiness of a sphere of a musical note. You put it well when you used the expression 'zen' to talk about my work: "the form is something empty." In talking about my work you only used the word "mystic" once: now that's what I want my writing to be, an ecstasy. This show exalts writing. And if the Chinese start from the bottom when they make their ideograms, I start from the top, and at times from the middle. The hand must run riot over the sheet of paper. This is why it's much easier for me to draw than to paint in oil. Oils force me to slow down. They practically suffocate me; the sign frees me. It's hard to be free when you're realizing a work. Slowness and refinishing are too caught up with craftsmanship. Art instead is the immediacy of sign. It's Speed, dynamism, even if the movement is registering a fall. an error, an imbalance or a catastrophe.

C.B.: What is art for you?

A.M.: I don't want to be misunderstood, but even if, politically speaking, I'm for democratic participation, I believe that art is a sign of aristocracy. By this I mean an aristocracy of the heart, of the spirit. The spirit can produce a work of art only when it is truly free. Obviously popular art exists, but art itself is never popular. And if it's already difficult to understand art, it's even more difficult to realize a work of art.

C.B.: Who were the artists that you loved the most in the twentieth century?

A.M.: My good friend Matisse. Klee. And Picasso.

C.B.: Who are the artists that you don't like?

A.M.: Oh! Many. There's a lot of bad painting around.

C.B.: At least one name? A.M.: No.

C.B.: More than one name ?

A.M.: I can't, because tomorrow I might change my mind.

C.B.: What do you think of Mirò? A.M.: Mirò is a great twentieth century artist. When you asked Mirò's opinion of something, he always answered, "And what do you think?"

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C.B.: What were your connections with Picasso?

A.M.: Picasso and I were good friends and we saw each other every day. We had a fight three or four years before he died. A reporter told Picasso that I had criticized him (which wasn't at all true) and from that time on Picasso no longer came to see me. Picasso always told D.H. Kahnweiler. "Masson is the only painter who I can talk about painting with."

C.B.: Did you know Brancusi ?

A.M.: Yes. I saw him twice. He was an artist who always spoke in negatives. He spoke by negations, not by affirmations. The first time, he told me. "Michelangelo is a beef-steak." I didn't understand. And he added, "All he knows how to do is muscles." Having told him that I was going to Venice, he said, "Saint Mark's is a bordello." Always talking this way can get a bit boring to listen to.

C.B.: Have you met Henry Moore? A.M.: Yes. He's a great artist. I really love him. And since he is a true artist. his judgments are always hard and biting. He's one of the greatest sculptors of the twentieth century, after Brancusi and Giacometti.

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C.B.: Who are the intellectuals you love the most?

A.M.: I really loved Bataille. And Lacan. And Roland Barthes. I'm also a good friend of the historians George Duby and André Chastel. I knew Walter Benjamin well; we were very close.

C.B.: What's the connection between the surrealists and drugs?

A.M.: The surrealists were against drugs. Breton took hashish a few times, but since it didn't do anything to him, he forbade the rest of the group to do drugs. The surrealists drank a lot.

All I've ever done is smoke hashish a few times and take opium three or four times.

Carmine Benincasa
(Translated by Michael Moore)
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