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Openings

A future historian¹ who seeks to characterize the 20th century will find this: philosophical literature returns to the theme of Being after a century almost exclusively concerned with the theme of Becoming, of Turning-to. That which focuses the interest of our century on itself is not the process, it is not history, it is not events. We are not entirely immersed in the current of events as our Victorian ancestors were. We emerge precariously, we *ek-sist* precariously, we look precariously for a point of support beyond the chain of events. We look for the Being beyond the beings and inside the beings. We look for the Being beyond ourselves and within ourselves. And we find nothing. We find the place supposedly occupied by Being as an empty place. We try to make our way out of the chain of events, and we find Nothing. From our effort, only the openings remain. Our search for Being results in openings to Nothing. The openings to Nothing, the chasms, the cracks, will characterize, for the future historian, the time which we live in. We are a *bodenlos* time, a time without foundation.

Our science reveals Nothing as the horizon of our world. Infra-nuclear particles and galaxies revolve in this Nothing, and they are themselves fundamentally nothing. The whole world is a huge chasm, a huge opening towards the Nothingness behind the infinitely small and the infinitely large. And our arts reveal the Nothing as the horizon of our Self. Our thoughts, our actions and our sufferings revolve in this Nothing. We are an abyss, an opening towards the Nothing signified by our thoughts and our life. We know that. But there are moments that concretely illuminate our knowledge in a ruthless focus. One of those moments was for me the definition of the atom as a wave of probabilities. Another was when I first saw one of Flexor's colossi.

The canvases' monumentality highlights the depth of the cracks that lacerate the giants. The solidity of the statures of these enormous entities highlights their emptiness. The shapes' plasticity and relief highlight the violence of their wounds. The colors of soil and blood of their bodies highlight the deadly paleness of the Nothing that corrodes their brains and bowels. Colossal beings, firmly standing on two solid legs: the concrete reality itself. And Nothing inside here. There is no doubt: Flexor painted our portraits. He painted five mirrors of our lives.

The contemplation of these five canvases is like the contemplation of a twentieth century altar, erected in the temple of Nothing. Flexor is our Gruenewald, our Brueghel. Just like the Re-

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naissance, this transition from medieval faith to modern doubt, paints the terror of a God that escapes, so Flexor, this articulation of the message of modern doubt to something unimaginable, paints the terror of the Nothing that invades. There is a multitude of texts to confirm this statement. More than illustrations, Flexor's paintings seem to be an experimental demonstration of texts such as Kafka, Rilke, Heidegger, Camus, and Beckett. Countless sentences of these texts seem to be comments on Flexor's canvases. There is a climate in common to all these articulations, and this climate can be summed up in Heidegger's sentence: "we exist for death." Flexor's canvases are portraits of openings to death, therefore they are 20th century's self-portraits.

In Heidegger, there is a discussion on the term "openness". The term is closely linked to "decision" (*Entschlossenheit*), that is, the outcome of something previously closed. Flexor's colossi are decided beings. They are beings who are not deluded, they are disillusioned beings, for they are decided against all illusion and towards reality. The reality is death. This is why there is nothing humble about these giants. They are proud, rebellious. They are proud of their decision. They are five Prometheuses, five affirmations of human dignity defying the absurd. However, why do I say "human dignity"? Are these giants men? Certainly, they are vaguely anthropomorphic. They have a head, a body, and legs. They have no face. Could a faceless being be human? Could a faceless being assert human dignity, if Kant says we owe deference to everyone who has a human face? I believe the answers to these questions are circumscribing Flexor's problem.



Samson Flexor with some of his "bipeds" at IX Bienal de São Paulo (1967).
Source: Flexor's family archive.

The giants are portraits of what we call “today's humanity.” Are we really men? Do we actually have faces? Can we call “face” to those replaceable masks that we wear to cover the Nothing inside and around us? We must remove this deception, this illusion that are our faces, our "persons." Flexor paints us as we are: faceless. Flexor paints us as we are: depersonalized. This is the first result of the opening decision: the masks fall off. On Flexor's paintings, we appear as we are. Depersonalized beings before the decision towards death. Unprotected beings, therefore. However, beings who accept the risk. Beings who no longer want to delude themselves. Not yet men, if man means to have a face. However, no longer ghosts, if ghost means wearing a mask. The very refusal of illusion, the refusal of religions' and science's “small talk” is a symptom of an awakening to our human dignity. Once these giants refuse the masks, for they are determined, for they do not have a face, they are affirmations of human dignity. Therefore, in the terror of these paintings there is an element of hope.

I do not know if this analysis is more than pure subjectivity. I do not know if others will feel this when they are exposed to the impact of these canvases. I certainly cannot reach a phenomenological distance when I am before these giants. I recognize myself in them. I cannot speak of them objectively. However, for me these colossi go beyond and surpass the philosophy and the art of absurd. They point out paths. Paths towards faces. They are not only diagnoses, they suggest a prognosis and a therapy. They ask us to follow a path. They are not affirmative canvases, they are imperative ones. They must be translated into the language of philosophy. They release themes for philosophy. They are “poetic” in that sense; they propose and produce themes. They are “original” because they create something from Nothing. They defy Nothing, and in defying Nothing they also defy the minds and sensibilities of those who encounter them. The pictures are calls for translations to new levels of meaning. Flexor's colossi are tasks.

Translation by Mario Cascardio