

*Agoramaquia (o caso exato da estátua)*  
Asier Mendizabal, 2014

Agoramaquia (the exact case of the statue)

1.

'Making poetry means bringing a mythical germ to evidence and fantastic fulfilment.' The sculptor Jorge Oteiza borrows this quote from Cesare Pavese in his book *Quousque Tandem...!*, published in 1963.<sup>1</sup> He continues quoting the poet: 'It also means, by giving a corporeal form to this germ, to reduce it to contemplative matter, to separate it from the maternal shadows of memory and, ultimately, to get used to not believing in it anymore, as if it were a mystery that is no more.' Oteiza refers the quote to Pavese's book *El oficio de poeta* [The Poet's Craft], published by Nueva Visión, from Buenos Aires, in 1957. The date is not irrelevant, since, as we will see, it locates the reading in a very particular moment of the sculptor's project. In parentheses, he adds a note before proceeding with the quotation: '(Sometimes one does not know if the poet is saying exactly what one reads, such is his work of prophecy)'. And concludes Pavese's quote: 'Then the artist's true suffering begins: when his myth gains form and, being *disoccupied*, he can no longer believe, but is still not capable of accepting the loss of that deed, of that authentic faith that kept him alive, and he tries it again, torments himself, suffers'. The emphasis in the word *disoccupied* is mine. Oteiza could have decided to emphasise it in his transcription. The unusual verb *disoccupy*, somewhat enigmatic in the context of the quote, would become, in the experimental proposition of the Basque sculptor, a key programmatic category and an accurate descriptive action of his formal technique, but, at the same time, of his poetic intention. In Pavese's quote, *disoccupied* is the adjective that describes the poet who has finished his work. The poet who, after formalizing – giving form to – the myth that was kept in the shadows of memory, faces the conclusion of his task as acceptance and loss. No longer occupied, his task finished.

In Oteiza the sculptor's theoretical work, *disoccupy* is an action in space. A technical category that literally explains the process of emptying, of activating a receptive space by creating a void. It is the guiding concept and the first to appear in his lucid



manifesto 'Experimental Proposition', which accompanied his contribution to the São Paulo Art Biennial in 1957. His first paragraph starts with: *The statue as active disoccupation or emptying of space through the fusion of unimposing formal elements* and some of the series and sculptures exhibited are entitled *disoccupation of the sphere, theorem of cubic disoccupation, test of active disoccupation of space with open flat unit in three stage or disoccupation of the cylinder*.

In this perspective, the appearance of the term *disoccupied* in the two texts from 1957 would be no more than a coincidence, and, besides, irrelevant, considering that each of its uses refers to a different meaning of the word *occupied*. In its most literal, spatial meaning in Oteiza; in its figurative meaning of work or labour in Pavese. Even if it were merely a coincidence, it would not be devoid of prophetic meaning (Sometimes one does not know if the poet is saying exactly what one reads, such is his work of prophecy). Spatial disoccupation, the emptying of the statue performed by Oteiza, necessarily concluded in the void. The sculptor's excited and fertile experimental period after his participation in the Bienal and until 1960 culminates in his abandonment of sculpture. With the formal logic of his process finished, Oteiza concludes that his task, a poetic consequence of disoccupation, has come to an end. Like Pavese's poet, he is disoccupied as a sculptor. Contrary to Pavese's poet, it is in his process of creating a figure, of formalisation, that he will generate the proposition of a myth. In a more ambivalent manner than Pavese presumes, and in a more complex manner than the sculptor's hagiographies suggest, Oteiza faces the idea of renunciation, resignation or loss.

Thus, the announcement of his formal conclusion, of his abandoning of sculpture, is made in 1960. Oteiza clearly enunciates this abandonment in April of that year, during his stay in the Peruvian city of Lima. From there, he sends the manifesto 'The end of contemporary art', which will be published in Madrid, and there he reads the conference 'Aesthetic conclusion and poetic

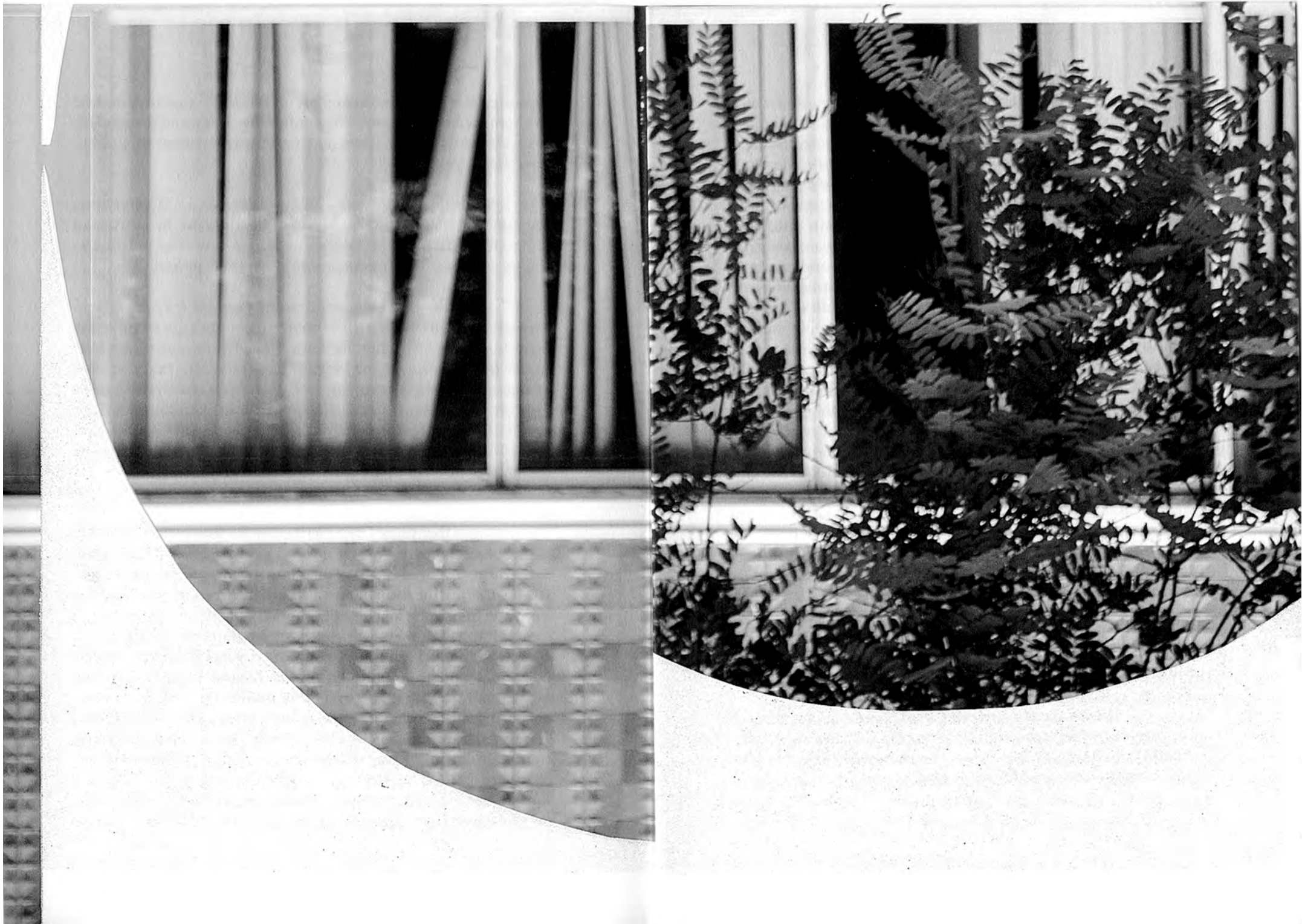
prolongation of contemporary art' at the IAC – Instituto de Arte Contemporáneo, in Lima. The conference, lost but later partially reproduced using his notes as a base, was a tribute to another poet: César Vallejo.

The titles of Oteiza's writings during those days in Lima anticipate the surprising ambition of his thought: by putting an end to his experimental process, he also puts an end to contemporary art, as an experiment and as a historical period.

To close that paragraph from *Quousque Tandem...!* in which he quoted Pavese, Oteiza resorts to another quote, this time from his own work, when he transcribes his *Interpretación estética de la estatuaria megalítica americana* [*Aesthetic Interpretation of American Megalithic Statuary*], of 1952: 'Woe unto those [sculptors] who show up through sheer inertia in periods when they aren't needed'.<sup>2</sup> It is improbable that Oteiza, back then, foreshadowed his abandoning of sculpture, but the sentence certainly anticipates his idea of the end of art.

2.

The prologue that Jorge Oteiza writes for the first collection of his poems, *Existe Dios al Noroeste* [*God Exists to the Northwest*]<sup>3</sup>, published in 1990, begins with the heading: 'I want to justify this book'. His need of justification makes us think that somehow he felt that this little book was not suited to explain the relation he had been maintaining with poetry since the 1950s. Since he published, in 1954, a very short edition of *Androcanto y sigo* [*I andro-sing and move on*],<sup>4</sup> a poem in fourteen cantos, his poems appeared only occasionally in magazines and other publications by the author, obscuring the fact that poetry had been gradually converted into an essential tool for his practice after he abandoned sculpture. In this prologue, by way of justification, Oteiza regrets the loss of a large part of his writings in different moments of his life. Among these losses, he feels especially sorry for one: 'the most painful loss is my conference in Lima about Vallejo'. He explains,



as he did on several occasions, that the poet's widow, after welcoming the conference with great enthusiasm, suggested that he get it published in book form by Losada, the publishing house from Buenos Aires that published César Vallejo's work. Clearly, he refers to the conference given at the IAC in April 1960; the one in which he announced, in a programmatic way, the end of his experimental process and the end of contemporary art. The fact that he considered having it published made him try, on several occasions, to write the conference based on his notes and memories, adding details to it until it had the form of a more ambitious essay. The collection of documents typewritten and full of handwritten annotations that constitute these attempts are, in some cases, work schemes. In two versions, the document starts with a desire to become a definitive version, but then it jumps to the conclusions, and the pencil corrections multiply, which makes us suppose that he never found the occasion to give them a final form. Among the titles considered for this unfinished essay, the one that seems to be the most definitive is 'Aesthetic Conclusion and Poetic Prolongation of Contemporary Art: And Reference to This Double Knowledge in Vallejo's Poetry'. It is also the best summary of his intentions.

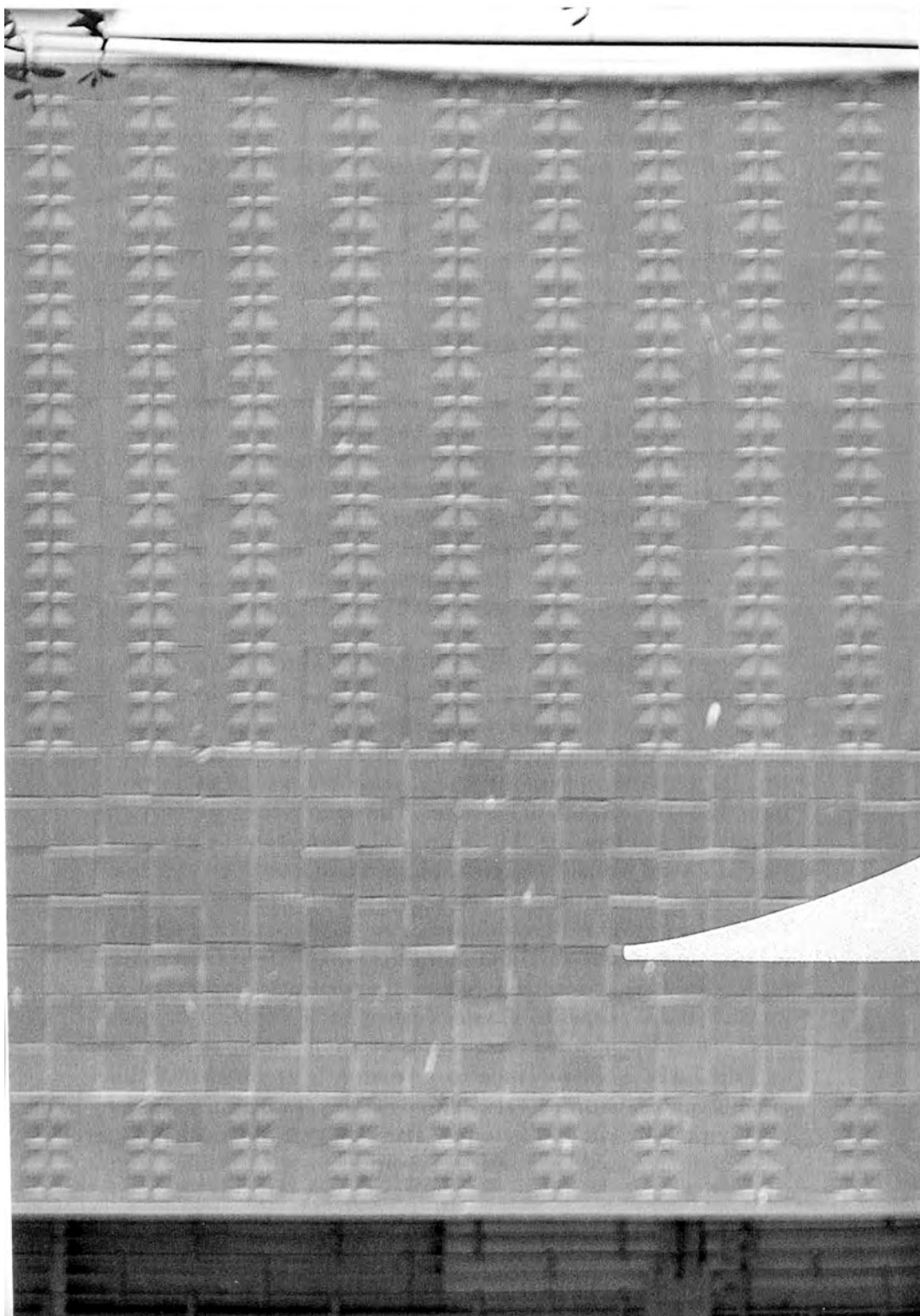
After Oteiza elucidated his experimental proposition in São Paulo in 1957, he increasingly theorised about the consequences that he derived directly from the formal process of his sculptures. In this formal process, fundamentally related to space, to the activation of an empty space that is conceived as a receptive hollow, through disoccupation, what was really at play, according to Oteiza, was time: the spatial-temporal relation.

*Art is a specific approach, in rigorously spatial, visual terms, of M[an]'s inner T[ime]. This inner T, existential T, vital T, psychological T, is art's true metaphysical object. It is the T that produces in M an existential discomfort.*

The quote is from one of the typewritten documents in which he reconstructs the conference given in Lima. The use of initials for Time and Man is constant in these notes, not so much as a matter of economy, but rather as a matter of style. During all his work, since the first exercises in the 1930s, Oteiza used the form of equation to illustrate his theses.

*Art seeks a solution for this inner and spiritual T, by approaching this T with two other Ts of distinct nature: the T of exterior reality, nature's continuous T, that blurs with movement, and the neutral, indifferent, say, non-temporal T, which is the zero T of the geometric shapes, of the ideal or mathematical beings. These three Times integrate in the first side of an equation, to produce as a solution, in the second side, a new nature, the nature of the aesthetic being, a fourth aesthetic T that assures the transcendence and immutability of the work of art.*

This is a formula Oteiza will repeat, with different variations and enunciations, throughout all his work. The role of art is to transform human conscience, the 'existential discomfort' that he will frequently define by borrowing from Miguel de Unamuno the concept of the 'tragic sense of life': the subjective, inner time he refers to in his notes. The strategies of art, over its history, try to elucidate this inner time through two categories that, in Oteiza's dialectics, are explained and identified with two ways of conceiving time and its relation to space (that is, movement): a time that is immobilised in the ideal space of geometry (abstraction, classicisms) and a time that 'breaks free' from space (expressionisms, baroques). In fact, this dialectics expressed in terms that are proper to physics corresponds, through the concrete examples given by Oteiza himself, to the binary, formalist conception of art history incarnated mainly by Heinrich Wölfflin and his contemporaries, exemplified in the paradigmatic duality between classicism and baroque. The idea that the mechanism of art can be reduced to a series of opposed pairs – the lineal and



the pictorial, surface and depth, etc. – which agree with the historical moments when the determinations demand an increase or a decrease in the pathos of expression, is a central idea in the formulation of the *Ley de los cambios* [*Law of Changes*],<sup>5</sup> in which Oteiza gathers all the intuitions we have mentioned. As Oteiza suggests in his conference in Lima, his aesthetic proposition is to solve, by way of an equation, the nature of the aesthetic being, by immobilising time, disoccupying space, and eventually making it culminate in an active space that he will call negative zero. In quasi-mythological terms, in Lima he refers to this agonising struggle with space as an *agoramaquia*. The logical consequence of this formal proposition is exhaustion. The solution of the aesthetic problem. From this point, art as an experimental problem came to an end. Thus, what concludes is not only the experimental project initiated by him, but with it, contemporary art as an experiment.

In the same days Oteiza prepared his conference in Lima, he also, possibly honouring a commitment that he had been postponing, wrote the text for the catalogue of the exhibition he would organise in collaboration with his friend Néstor Basterretxea at the Neblí Gallery, in Madrid. The text has the tone and the vocation of a manifesto. Entitled ‘The End of Contemporary Art’, it is a declaration of his abandoning of sculpture, sent as an explanation for an exhibition from which he already appears distant.

*I am going to summarise my reasons for abandoning sculpture. The logical process is somewhat extensive, and on this voyage, in which I find myself as if I were inside a great statue that I previously knew only from the outside, I have not found a free moment to devote to it. The sculptor, working within a new vision, does little more than construct a new memory. We finish the sculpture and begin to remember, forward, to live in a different way. Contemporary art has ended. Like everything that truly begins, it truly comes to an end.*

This task, consequence of the culmination of the process carried out, is not different from the one described by Cesare Pavese, with whose quote, via Oteiza himself, we opened this text. The formalisation, the realisation of a mythical germ that, according to Pavese, constitutes the task of the poem. To give ‘this germ a corporeal form’ and to ‘get used to not believing it anymore, as in a mystery that no longer is’. It is a mythical and, paradoxically, demystifying enterprise.

The manifesto proposes a possibility for art to continue – something he insists on more explicitly in the notes of the conference about Vallejo – not as an aesthetic project, ‘as theory and experimentation’, but ‘from a poetics, as Valéry had it. That is, as a romantic and popular exercise.’ He does not make clear which assertion from Paul Valéry he is referring to, but in the poet’s writings there are allusions to a caesura in the historical process of art that propose a similar thinking. Thus, in his *Cahiers*, Valéry says, ‘it is possible to imagine a time when specialised and specific arts will be abolished and replaced by the art of ordinary activities. And, in sum, by the art of living. This would be genuine civilisation, and possibly everything goes in that direction. Our special arts would be steps’. This idea of steps and of the exhaustion of the ‘specialised’ art, of its conclusion, reverberates in Oteiza’s conception of the *Law of Changes*. It is revealing that Oteiza identifies this prolongation as *poetics* and that, in order to illustrate this insight, he alludes once more to a poet. Oteiza’s closing gesture has been sufficiently analysed. Maybe it has been neglected, and maybe it is convenient for our time to understand what he proposed in this ‘poetic prolongation’.

If, in Pavese, this conclusion of the poet’s task appears as a sacrificial moment – ‘then the artist’s true suffering begins: when his myth gains form and he, *disoccupied*, can no longer believe, but is still incapable of accepting the loss of that deed, of that authentic faith, which kept him alive, and he tries it again, agonises, suffers’ – in the reference to Valéry ‘abolition’ is no





Estela Funeraria para Cesar Vallejo em Lima, de Jorge Oteiza,  
fotografia de Tatiana Guerrero

more than an almost teleological, civilisational outcome, a consequence of the historical becoming and not so much a sacrificial gesture of renunciation. Since the end of the 1950s, Oteiza would oscillate between these two figurations of the end of art. On the one hand, the idea of exhaustion: the conclusion of a process seen as a search in which, to conclude, he must sacrifice himself as a sculptor. On the other hand, the idea of abandonment: the overcoming of an experimental language in order to engage in political practices based on what was learned. In Oteiza, this dichotomy persists as an unsolved paradox.

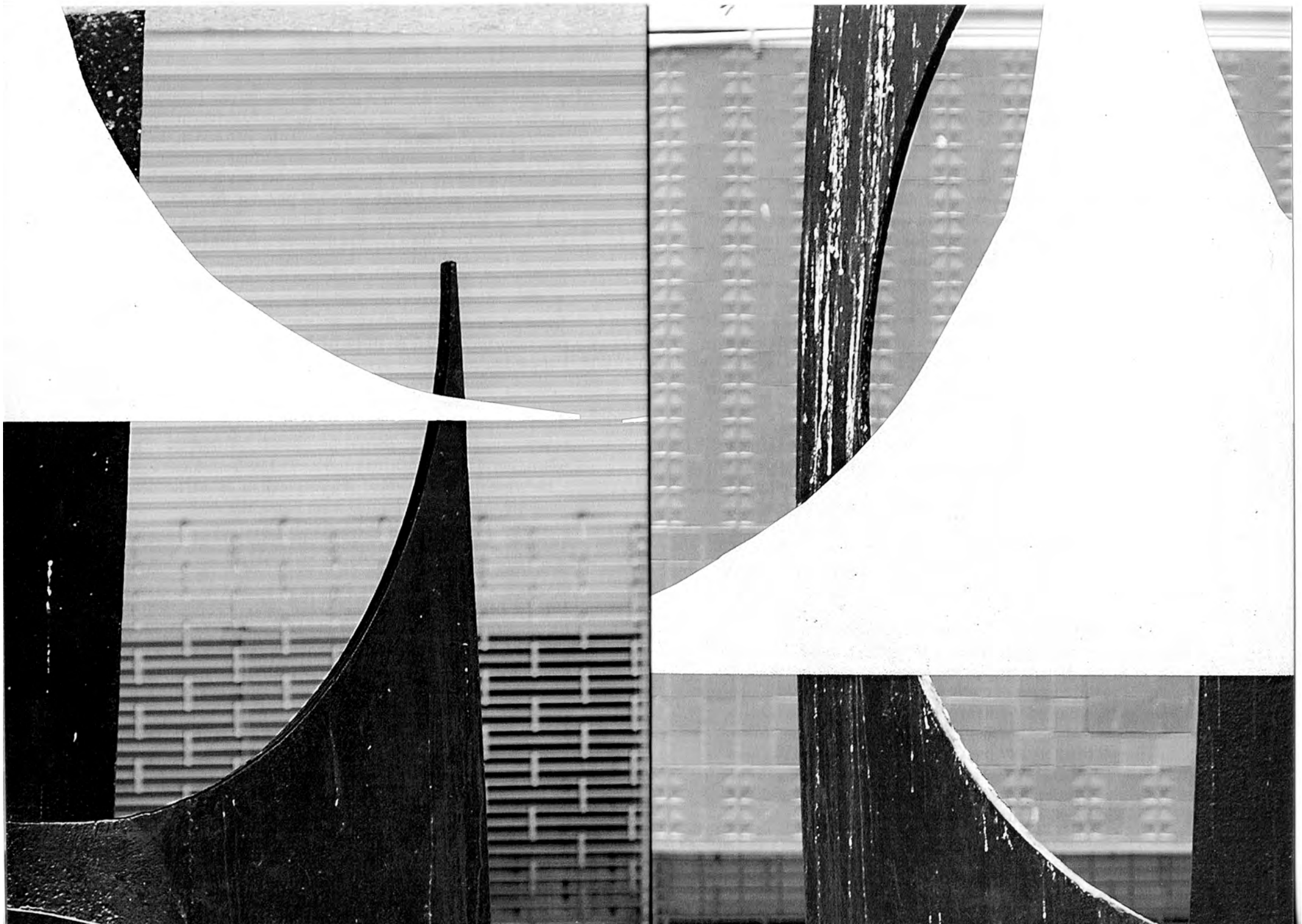
3.

In those days of April, Oteiza was in Lima by invitation of sculptors and architects whom he had been in touch with since his stay in the country in 1947 (a vital influence, as recognised by the artists themselves, for the creation of the Agrupación Espacio, germ of the avant-garde in the Andean country) and who he had met again in São Paulo three years before. This time, they invited him to make a monument in memory of César Vallejo. Oteiza had already made a sculpture dedicated to the poet. Formally and materially connected to the ones he made for São Paulo, it was part of his conclusion period. *Spain, Take This Chalice Away from Me* was the title of the sculpture, taken from the book of poems Vallejo dedicated to the Spanish Civil War. As a subtitle, it included the description *Funerary Stela in Honour of César Vallejo*. The idea was that the Peruvian sculptors Joaquín Roca Rey and Jorge Piqueras, who had relations with the IAC, would be responsible for making a large-scale replica of that piece in Lima, giving it characteristics of a monument. Oteiza was travelling around Latin America at the time, and this became the opportunity to publicly present his commitment and to raise funds for the construction of the monument. This was, thus, the main purpose of the conference at the IAC.

Some weeks before, the sculptor had arrived in Montevideo, in order to take part in the architecture competition

promoted by the Uruguayan government one year before. The purpose of the competition was to pay tribute to the former president and historical *colorado* leader José Batlle y Ordóñez, and Oteiza presented, in collaboration with the architect Roberto Puig, an ambitious architectural project that was totally consistent with his aesthetic proposition and his purpose formalised in the sculpture. In a way, the project made it possible to apply Oteiza's conclusions from his experimental process with sculpture to the city, in real scale. However, it was not 'sculptural' architecture, neither was it a sculpture with architectural dimensions. The typology Oteiza experimented with here was a genuinely new typology, where his aesthetic theories served specific uses and relations, impossible in the experimental stage of his sculpture laboratory.

Oteiza went to Lima while he waited for the jury's final decision in Montevideo. he never doubted that he would win the competition. Thus, it should be considered that the moment when Oteiza finishes, on the one hand, his monument to Vallejo – unbearably conventional if compared to what he proposes in Montevideo – and, on the other hand, the declaration of his abandoning of sculpture and his 'move to the city', coincided with his expectations about the result of the competition. In this renouncing to art and embracing 'the city', the latter was always seen as a metaphor for the political role of art. Like a belated and somewhat disenchanted echo of constructivism in its move to productivism. Like a rather tragic recognition of the artist's political responsibility. Although this idea will be further elaborated in the artist's thought, we can presume that, in that specific moment, in those days, his mention to a 'move to the city' was strict. If Oteiza was really sure he would win the competition in Montevideo, it is not difficult to imagine that his disdain when he talks about his own sculptures ('when I talk about these stones, I can say I do not know them myself') had to do with the fact that he was convinced that soon he would be able to work in a much more complex and effective scale, through a unique application



of his aesthetic conclusions to urbanism and architecture. Maybe his desire to 'move to the city' was, in that moment, absolutely literal.

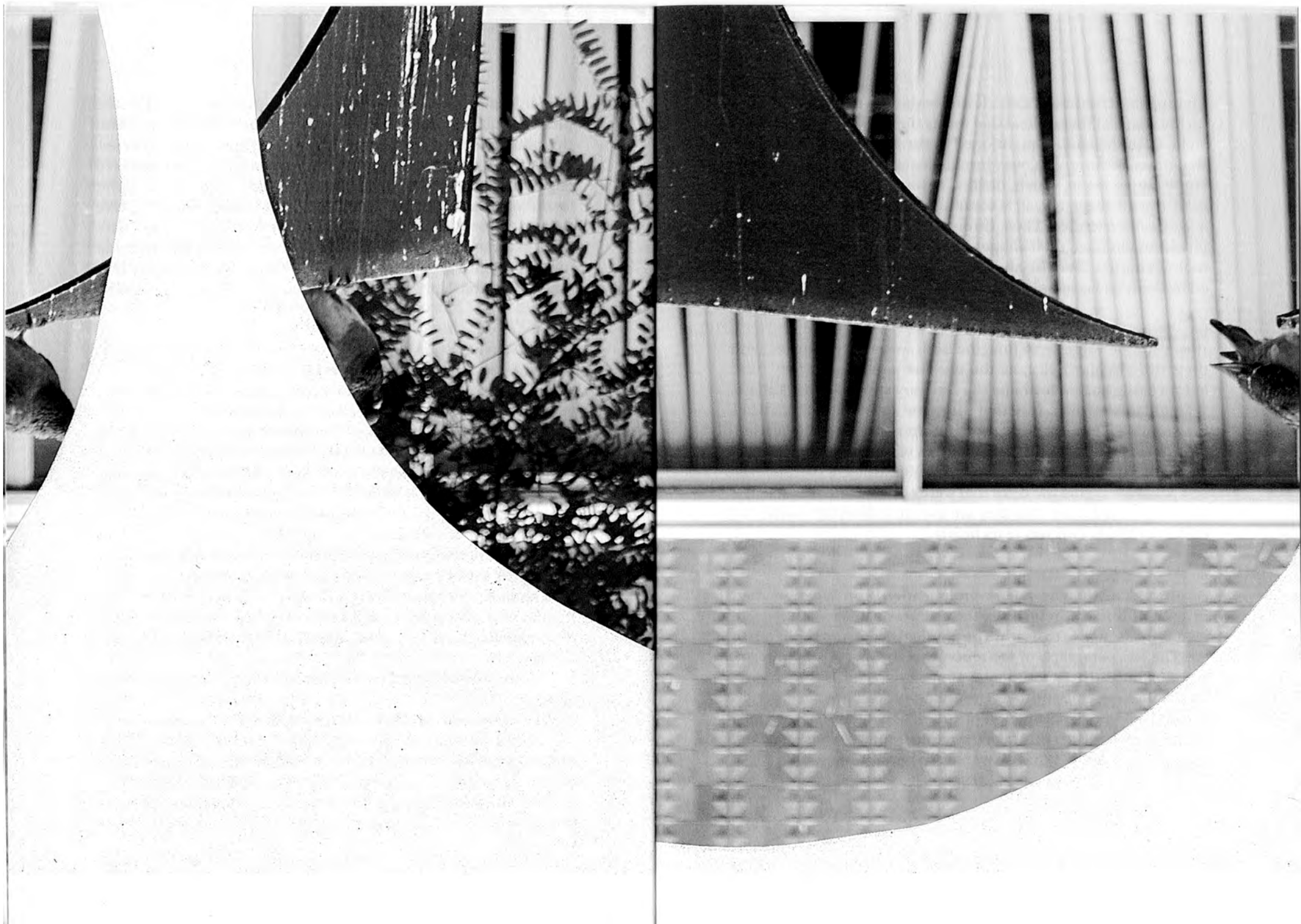
Ups and downs in the Uruguayan government led to the cancellation of the project, after declaring null and void a competition in which everybody took for granted that Oteiza's proposition would be the winner. From this moment on, the sculptor converts his recurring failures into a tragic fate that would come to prove the irreducible honesty of his endeavour.

4. One of the most paradigmatic pieces of Oteiza's experimental work in the Bienal de São Paulo in 1957 was *Par espacial ingravido*, also entitled *Par móvil* [*Mobile Pair*]. The small sculpture, in its various versions, addressed a formal problem: the need of at least three points to support any given solid. Formed by two semicircles made of steel sheets and joined perpendicularly by an eccentric point in their straight sides, it was always supported by two points on its circular edges. Since the welding joint was displaced from the centre (in the point that results from applying the golden ratio), the weight of the piece was never stabilised in the centre, and thus the whole structure remained unstable, rotating on one edge and then transferring its weight to the other edge, on which it rotated again, advancing in a potentially infinite oscillation. This perpetual motion referred to by the title *Mobile Pair* was a finding that complemented, in its relation to time and space, the series of disoccupation of the sphere, which was also exhibited in the Bienal. *Mobile Pair* would be resignified many years later, in the context of the Basque Country, to make a new funerary stela. A new monument. Oteiza, unofficially and on his own initiative, installed a scaled-up replica of this *Mobile Pair* to identify the place where ETA member Txabi Etxebarrieta was shot dead by the Spanish Civil Guard in 1968. He was the first member of the organisation to be killed in an armed action, and also the first to kill a civil guard, José Pardines Arcay, the day before,

not far from that junction. For this occasion, Oteiza renamed the piece as *Walking Cross Stela, Homage to Txabi Etxebarrieta*. With this allusion to the walking cross, the piece's unstable character, its rhythmical movement oscillating between the two opposed edges, takes on a metaphorical function that did not correspond to the abstract formal investigation from which the sculpture derived. It took the form of a funerary stela. Becoming the symbolic mark of the first two of a long list of deaths, this perpetual motion of counterbalances converted the abstract structure into a metaphor for the vicious swirl of events that was put in motion there.

When explaining his stela in honour of César Vallejo in the conference in Lima in which he takes Vallejo's poetry as a prescient example of the 'poetic prolongation' of a finished art, Oteiza suggests a similar exercise. Based on some verses of the poem from which Oteiza took the title to his sculpture, *Spain, Take This Chalice Away from Me*, written by Vallejo during the last months of his life in allusion to the Spanish Civil War, the sculptor proposes a metaphorical, almost figurative interpretation of the stela. The original sculpture, now of unknown whereabouts, was formed by two steel sheets, from which two circles had been cut out. The perforated sheets had been curved in order to create an inner space of roughly cylindrical form. In this arrangement, they kind of 'embraced' the *disoccupied* inner space, thus creating the void Oteiza constantly refers to in his final pieces. This small, missing stela was, according to Oteiza, his last sculpture.

In his reading for the conference in Lima, Oteiza inscribed, in these two steel sheets perforated by two pairs of discs that opened up in one of their sides, images from Vallejo's poetry. Verses such as 'two earthly sheets' or 'if the sky fits in two earthly limbos' were used to evoke a series of allusions forced upon these two metal sheets that make the stela. Two earthly sheets and two limbos. The limbo, besides being 'the place where the righteous people wait', as Oteiza writes with pencil in his manuscript, is



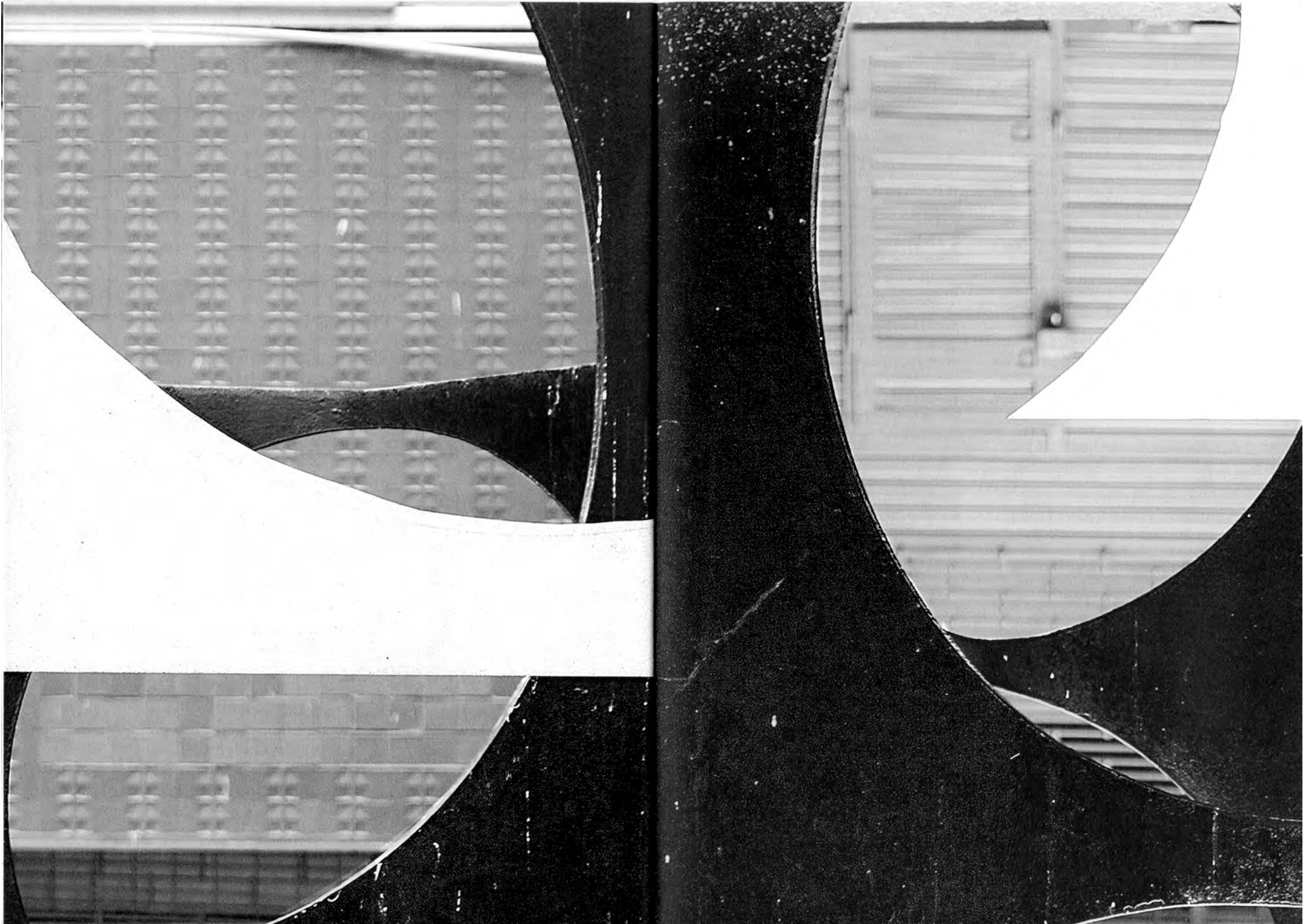
'the apparent outline of the celestial bodies' in astronomy, drawn on the shape of metal sheet that forms the circular hollows in the stela. Even the chalice mentioned in the title, the Christian sacrament of communion, was invoked as a tragic moment in the empty upper circle, which, divided in two edges by the curvature of the metal sheet, reveals a communion wafer being broken, as a symbol of sacrifice. Thus, through Vallejo's verses, the empty discs, cut out from their shapes of metal sheet, are signs that are more figurative than the abstract experimental process concluded by them had originally proposed.

5.

It is a simple exercise to imagine both rectangular sheets, with their two circular holes, as the two flat steel sheets they were before being curved to shape the funerary stela to César Vallejo. If we did this we would see that the metal sheets, with both discs drawn in negative, are what remains after cutting out two circular pieces; that the outline created this way is no more than the remaining material of this cut, possibly discarded in the atelier as scrap. If we imagine the discs that were cut out from this sheet, it will not be hard to see that they are the same discs Oteiza used to make the *Mobile Pair* two years before.

6.

Death and myth. The poetic prolongation, the function that, in spite of himself, returns as the sculptor's unavoidable need, relates to resistance to death. The physical death and the death of art. The last paragraph of the report that, by way of a manifesto, accompanies his 'Experimental Proposition' for the Bienal de São Paulo in 1957 is entitled 'The Funerary Stela': 'What emerges aesthetically as disoccupation of space, as freedom, transcends as a place outside death. I take the name from what has just died. I return from death. What we wanted to bury, grows here.'<sup>6</sup>



<sup>1</sup> *Quousque Tandem...!*, read by a surprising number of Basque youth who understood the need to reinvent the cultural imagery as a political project during the resistance to Franco's regime, did not have an orthodox pagination. The quoted fragment belongs to section 56, in its seven existing editions up to the moment. The referenced edition in this occasion is the first one, published in 1963 by Auñamendi, San Sebastián.

<sup>2</sup> On page 125 of his *Interpretación estética de la estatuaria megalítica americana* [*Aesthetic Interpretation of American Megalithic Statuary*], Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, Madrid, 1952, the first book published by Oteiza. It presents the conclusions of the trip that took him to South America in 1935, with the initial purpose of studying pre-Colombian megalithic sculpture. Numerous reasons, being the Spanish Civil War the most painful, made him prolong his stay until 1949. This stay would have vital influence on Oteiza. Not enough importance has been given to the undeniable influence that he himself exerted, during this one and a succession of later visits, in some of the South American contexts in which he took part.

It is worth recovering the sentences that precede this quote: 'A sculptor is neither more nor less than the inicial and dramatic form of a new universal type of man - he

is just that. A statue is a political solution.'

Other quotes in this aesthetic interpretation remind us of the one about the creation of myth, borrowed from Pavese. Among them, because it appears two times in the book, I transcribe the following two: '(Plato: 'The mission of the true poet is not to compose speeches in verse, but to invent myths'. Unamuno: 'I do not devote myself to philosophising, but to mythologising')' on page 39, and again 'The mission of the artist is to invent myths' (Plato), 'the mission of the artist is not to philosophise, but to mythologise' (Unamuno), on page 117.

<sup>3</sup> *Existe Dios al Noroeste* [*God Exists to the Northwest*], Pamiela, Pamplona, 1990. Revealingly, Oteiza decided that the different sections of this anthology of poems would be organised by decades, which more or less coincided with his age, since he was born in 1908. Thus, he implicitly associated the resource to poetry with his life trajectory.

*I noticed that from my sculptures*

*Words came out*

*I felt that this was the end  
So I moved from my language of  
sculpture, slow and expensive  
To this economy of language,  
happier, safer,*

*More practical,*

*Lightening words on a  
sheet of paper.*

The book was reprinted four times only in the last three months of 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Published in a provisional edition of 150 copies, *Androcanto y sigo* [*I andro-sing and move on*] referred to an actual and relevant event in the cultural and political Basque panorama of the time. The construction of a new church in the mountain of Arantzazu was charged of symbolism for being commissioned to a group of architects and artists who proposed a rather cryptic answer from art, interpreted as a criticism to Franco's regime and to ecclesiastic hierarchy, from a social perspective and of recovery of Basque culture. Oteiza's poem refers to the censorship suffered by his project and to the abandonment of his sculptures by the road that led to the cathedral. The works would eventually restart in 1968 and become a crucial wake-up call in the redefinition of Basque culture.

<sup>5</sup> The *Law of Changes*, which had been mentioned in *Quousque Tandem...!*, appears formulated as a thesis mainly in two texts, two conferences. The first one, held in 1964, was entitled 'Ideología y técnica desde una ley de los cambios para el arte' ['Ideology and Technique Based on a Law of Changes for Art']. It was published in *Oteiza 1933-1968*, Editorial Nueva Forma, Madrid, in 1968. The second

one, 'El arte como escuela política de tomas de conciencia' ['Art as a Political School for Raising Awareness'], was printed in 1965 for its publication in what was to be the book *Ejercicios espirituales en un túnel* [*Spiritual Exercises in a Tunnel*]. The impact that the political readings of *Quousque Tandem...!* caused one year before led Franco's censorship to ban its publication, and the material was illegally distributed until, in 1983, the printed pages kept during 19 years were included in collection of new texts in the first edition of the book, published by Editorial Hordago, San Sebastián, in 1983. A later publication, *Ley de los cambios* [*Law of changes*], Ediciones Tristán-Deche Arte Contemporáneo, Zarautz, 1990, included both texts.

<sup>6</sup> *Escultura de Oteiza. Catálogo IV Bienal de São Paulo, 1957*. Self-published (500 copies in Spanish and 500 copies in French), this report, known as 'Propósito Experimental' ['Experimental Proposition'], is the manifesto that accompanied the sculptor's contribution to the Biennial.



