

ANTONY GORMLEY

ANDREW RENTON - ANTONY GORMLEY: ALL BODIES FALL AT THE SAME SPEED

From CRITICAL MASS, Stadtraum Remise, Vienna, Austria, 1995

The lack of an absolute standard of rest meant that one could not determine whether two events that took place at different times occurred in the same position in space.[1]

At what point in time or place does the body come to rest? The question asks itself because there is no body without a space for it to occupy. A place of being cannot be aware of itself. There is nothing to "see" until a distance can be established between the perceiving and the perceived bodies. It is the body which is always aware of itself as a body, but for it to signify beyond itself, there must be something to see, or at least somewhere in which seeing might take place.

But seeing is not only enacted with the eyes, it is a function of the body as a whole. The physicality, the mass of the body, determines everything in relation to itself. It is the body which actually constructs the space. This is a construction out of a void, rather than the partition of prior space. Or perhaps, one might say that the body comes to re-invest in a place it recognises but from which it has long been excluded.

Antony Gormley's recent work has been asking itself this question, of how to find a space for itself. It may not appear to be a question that needs to be asked when the work so specifically addresses the nature of embodiment and mass. In the study of physics, we have been taught, the body's mass remains a constant: all bodies fall at the same rate. We might think of this fall, however metaphoricised (even theologised), as something finite, where the body's motion implies a journey between one fixed point and another. However, if we address the body with gravity taken account (in theological terms, after the fall), then the body is in perpetual, invisible motion, between an infinite number of fixed points.

Yet in the realm of the visible, the appearance of mass is less stable, because perception must be accounted for. But how to account for this perception-a notion more unstable and accountable than any other?

Gormley's solution appears to lie in the visual instability built into the work. The object cannot find its place. It has its limitations. These "limitations" speak of the moment or moments in the work where it defines itself in terms of what it cannot do, in terms of what limits it as a body. And, therefore, through this limiting it comes to show what it might be able to achieve.

Perhaps this should not be termed limitation so much as permutation. But even then permutations can be calculated, and we are addressing the infinitude that is the consequence of limitations. Just because the body is subject to rules which govern its motion, it does not mean that the perceiving eye can resolve all of the body's journeys.

Then go. Start to go. On unseen feet start to go. So slow that only change of place to show he went. As when he disappeared only to reappear later at another place. Then disappeared again only to reappear again later at another place again. So again and again disappeared again only to reappear again at another place again.[2]

Bodies, then, trace paths or make journeys. This implies that the body's appearance is affected by such invisible motion. It looks different. Rather, it looks different to you. It changes with perception or its lack. The viewer seeks a pattern to the movement and distribution of the body or bodies. It attempts to differentiate between one body in situ and another. The differentiation must be ascertained through the body and its surrounding space.

Indeed, a confusion occurs, here, between one form and another. Gormley's figures are so much "embodied figments" of the one body that to perceive one figure as somehow representing the body in its entirety would be misleading. The contradiction of the physical encounter (embodiment) and the imagined construction (figment) are bound together. If this is sculpture, it must of necessity always involve a relational act; not only between the perceiving viewer and his or her body, but a constant remembered third party or projected memory, of the body as it was and as it might be. Of the body on its way. Because the body is always witness to itself in its motion.

But how to make this motion? Gormley's figures do not have the semblance of motion of, say, a Giacometti, where however disproportionately grounded, the figures allude to motion. By contrast, in these recent works by Gormley, the body cannot appear to be a moving body; the body is closed tightly upon itself, limbs packed against torso. Moreover, these bodies seek a grounding, a gravitational relation to the earth. But because of their very openness, their multivalency, they do not have a specific grounding or obvious placement. They seek placement.

And their feet are a straight foot.[3]

here is a material achievement of place brought about by motion. The cast iron body forms are perhaps more 'immovable' than the lead-covered body cases. They cannot not occupy the space. But how much more ironic, then, that Gormley should seek to challenge that immovability, with the one thing which can counteract it - expansive space. A work which is made of absences and cast spaces becomes an element in other emptied spaces.

These are specifically not simply empty spaces, but rather spaces that have a sense or a memory of having been purged of all occupancy. This space, in particular, where CRITICAL MASS occurs, even retains the lines of egress, the evidence of something having made its way. The figure enacts its absences to the point of absorption. CRITICAL MASS, then, might be that moment when the body can hardly hold its own within the space, when the space is so disorientating, that the perceiving body also fails to hold its own.

With all this mass, the ironic achievement here lies in the instability of the scene, that the physically embodied will always be countered by its negative spatial counterpart. In other words, for every body in motion, there is a space produced in which to perceive it. Conventionally, one force (space) yields to another (object). Gormley, however, establishes the rules of his new physics, to make manifest the tension between them. This tension makes the scene appear to be on the point of collapse, so overwhelming, even, as to become all but invisible.

So what remains of the body? The answer lies in the definition of this turning point, this moment of critical perception; the instant when the body is stable enough to be seen. According to Newtonian physics, mass would be the object's resistance to acceleration. But in visual terms that resistance is what becomes the object of contemplation. It is less of a negative force than it is a holding-together or a form of visual continuity. Resistance, here, becomes the place of recognition within the random redistribution of the body in all its possible manifestations and reappearances.

Because there is hardly any equilibrium here. Gormley's figures are not stable, despite their mass. You want to move them. They demand some kind of intervention. But what kind of desire is this? What provokes this desire? It is something to do with the way that we perceive ourselves, of course, and the way that the object of contemplation is experienced as a body that is all but our own. But in this work there is something more at stake. These bodies do something our own can and something other. They resist an internalised disorder, they resist their own absolute random distribution in this strangely familiar space. Rather they draw the space around them towards themselves, drawing other bodies near, with some kind of rhythmic constant.

ANDREW RENTON

London, September 1995

1.Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, London: Bantam, 1988, p. 17.

2.Samuel Beckett, "Stirrings Still," in *As the Story was Told*, London: John Calder, 1990, p. 115.

3.Ezekiel 1:7.
