WJT MITCHELL - WHAT SCULPTURE WANTS: PLACING ANTONY GORMLEY

From ANTONY GORMLEY, Phaidon, London, UK, 1995 and 2000

'The continuation into the twentieth century of a traditional treatment of the human figure is not given a place in these pages …'
- Rosalind Krauss, Passages in Modern Sculpture (1977)

'Sculpture: the embodiment of the truth of Being in its work of instituting places.'
- Martin Heidegger, 'Art and Space' (1969)

'It is undeniable that from man, as from a perfect model, statues and pieces of sculpture … were first derived.'
- Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Artists (1568)

Sculpture is the most ancient, conservative and intractable of the media. 'The material in which God worked to fashion the first man was a lump of clay', notes Vasari, [1] and the result was a notoriously rebellious sculptural self-portrait, since God took himself as the model and formed Adam (or Adam and Eve together) 'in his image'. You know the rest of the story. God breathes life into the clay figures. They have minds of their own, rebel against their creator, and are punished for it by being condemned to leave their paradisal home and work all their lives, only to die and return to the shapeless matter from which they emerged. Variations of this myth appear in many cultures and materials: Prometheus' creation of man from clay; the Jewish Golem; the clay statuettes animated by the Great Spirit in Hopi legend; Pygmalion falling in love with his own statue; 'the modern Prometheus', Dr Frankenstein, who uses dead bodies as material for his rebellious creatures; the metallic humanoids of contemporary science fiction, the 'post-human' creatures known as robots and cyborgs.

There is a circular process at work in these narratives. Man is both the sculpted object and the sculpting agent, both created as and creator of sculpted images. God introduces man and other creatures into the world by means of the art of sculpture. Then man brings sculpture (and gods) into the world by creating material images of himself and other creatures. The dangerous moment is invariably associated with animation, when the sculpted object takes on 'a life of its own' - when it begins to speak, move, breathe, acquire consciousness, act on its own or (most simply) when people begin to believe that the sculpted object can do these things, and to project life into them. The god of monotheism, the deity of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, understands that image-making as such is a dangerous business and establishes an absolute prohibition on it:
'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:
'Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generations of them that hate me.'[2]

Vasari understood that this prohibition spelled trouble for the arts, and especially the art of sculpture. So he resorts to a familiar distinction: 'It was the worship given to statues, not the making of them, which was wickedly sinful'.[3] Vasari then cites the usual precedents: 'The art of design and of sculpture, in all kinds of metal as well as marble, was taught by God … They made the two golden cherubim, the candlesticks and the veil, and the hems of the sacerdotal vestments, all the beautiful casts for the Tabernacle.'[4] Vasari finesses the question of images of the human form and ignores (as he must) the clear language of the Second Commandment, which prohibits 'the making' of statues as such, not just the worship of them.

The Second Commandment seems to presume a 'slippery slope' principle of image-making: if one allows human beings to make statues or images of any kind, the images will sooner or later take on a life of their own and ultimately become objects of worship. Better to stop the whole process at its origin or insist on arts that refuse all image-making, figuration or representation, arts of pure ornamentation or abstraction. Sculpture, especially the kind modeled on the human body, is not only the first but the most dangerous of the arts. It impiously elevates the human image to the status of a god, reifies mortal men into immortal idols and degrades spirit into dead matter.

Sometimes it seems, then, as if sculpture achieves its truest vocation not when it is erected but when it is pulled down. Adam has not only feet of clay but an entire body made of fragile, biodegradable material; he is built to fall. Statues, as Antony Gormley has observed (and demon¬strated in his recent work) may take on more force if they look abandoned or 'deposed': 'even a deposed statue has meaning, potency, and relevance.'[5] Indeed, Shelley's 'Ozymandias' suggests that monumental sculpture finds its truest vocation when the statue is in ruins, and its boastful inscription 'Look on my works, ye Mighty and despair' takes on a new meaning, precisely the opposite of the original intention.

Let us fast forward now to the present day, when these archaic and mythical taboos on sculpture seem at best a faint and distant memory. What place does sculpture have in the contemporary system of the arts? Has it been swallowed up, along with photography, painting, collage and technical media into an overarching art of spectacle, of display, installation and environmental design, a media-scape of infinitely malleable and de-materialized images? Or does it have a distinctive role to play as a specific medium linked with its immeasurably long and deep history? What role, more specifically, does sculpture oriented towards the human body have to play in our time?

Certainly sculpture played a key role in the unfolding of artistic Modernism and Postmodern-ism. Every abstract movement in modern painting had its sculptural counterpart. Minimalist sculpture and the readymade even dared to challenge painting in its quest for supremacy in the negation of figuration and representation. Sculpture in the 1960s expressed concerns, as the artist Robert Morris put it, 'not only distinct but hostile to those of painting'.[6] Paintings, as critic Michael Fried lamented, began to take on 'object-hood',[7] asserting their three-dimensional physical presence in real space, or becoming themselves something like cabinets for the storage of more objects of three-dimensional manipulation.

But sculpture, whether it obeyed Fried's Modernist imperative (exemplified by David Smith and Anthony Caro) of virtuality, opticality, gestural significance and anti-theatrical autonomy, or asserted itself in what art critic Rosalind Krauss called its 'expanded field', has still seemed to many a kind of homeless art. Does it belong in a sculpture garden? A special wing of the museum? Next to an architectural monument like the parsley garnish next to a roast? An ornament to the public plaza, as an invisible prop like the typical work of 'public art'? An obtrusive barrier like Richard Serra's

Tilted Arc (1981)? Or off in the wilderness, a disappeared monument, like Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty (1970)?

The question of place, site or location has always been a central issue for sculpture. Unlike painting, it normally does not carry its frame with it, and is thus much more sensitive to issues of placement. It does not project a virtual space, opening a window into immensity as (say) landscape painting does; it takes up space, moves in and occupies a site, obtruding on it or changing it. It risks failure on two fronts, by being too obtrusive (Serra) or too passive (the statue as perch for pigeons). There seems to be an ideal middle place, a Utopia for sculpture, hinted at in the notion of the 'genius loci', the spirit of place embodied in the sculptural figure that seems to belong to a place, to express its inner being, and to 'activate' the place by incarnating its special character.[8]

But this notion of sculpture as rooted in a specific place, organically connected with its site, seems like an archaic and nostalgic residue, perhaps appropriate for a primitive, sedentary society, deeply connected to the land. It reeks of Heideggerean mysticism, of clearings in the wilderness, 'the release of places at which a god appears', [9] as when the dryad or tree spirit is 'released' from its prison by the sculptor who carves a figure from the trunk. What possible application could it have for modern cultures caught up in vortices of mobility, flow and instantaneous global communication? What is the place of sculpture - especially sculpture focused on the human body - today?

Antony Gormley's sculpture constitutes a profound reflection on sculpture and place, understood in the broadest possible sense. 'Place' includes both physical and institutional sites, the cultural location of sculpture among the arts and media as well as its placement in real space. It also designates the sculptural work itself as a place or space, a specific site that occupies or 'displaces' a certain volume, opening a hollow or bodyscape, an interior more or less distinguish-able from an exterior. As Heidegger puts it, 'things themselves are places and do not merely belong to a place.'[10] This is especially true when the thing is a human body or a sculptural representation of it. The human body is the most highly charged place in our experience. It is an inescapable prison and the portal to every conceivable flight of fantasy.

Gormley's work comes at the problem of space by raising the question of 'what sculpture wants' - that is, both what it desires or longs for, and what it lacks - in our time, and (as is argued later) in any time whatsoever. What sculpture wants is a place to stand, a site, a location both literally and figuratively, and Gormley's work provides a profound expression of this longing for space. Like the naked human body which is the first model for and object of sculpture, it is both a homeless wanderer, an exile from the Edenic Utopia where it was the genius of the place, and itself the home that it can never completely abandon. Sculpture wants both a place to be, and to be a place.

These remarks initially appear to be out of step with contemporary thinking about the arts on at least two fronts. First, the attribution of desires to a medium and the specific images that appear within it, seems like a flirtation with animism or totemism, the personification of inanimate objects and the entire set of practices (the medium) in which those objects are produced. [11] Second, the suggestion that there is a transcendental or at least abiding set of problems associated with the medium of sculpture, seems like a lapse into a historical formalism. However, it is only by risking an exploration of the deeply abiding conditions of an artistic medium that we can hope to specify its historical modulations with any precision. [12] Only by exploring the human attribution of agency, aura, person¬hood and animacy to artificial objects can we hope to understand those objects, the media in which they appear, and the effects they have on beholders.

Statues: Sculpture as Place
'Statue n. L. statua, f. sta-, root of stare to stand … 1. A representation in the round of a living being, sculptured, moulded, or cast in marble, metal, plaster or the like materials; esp. a figure of a deity, allegorical personage, or eminent person, usually of life-size proportions. Also transf. and similitave, as a type of silence or absence of movement or feeling.'
- Oxford English Dictionary

Gormley's importance begins with his insistence on taking the human body - specifically his own body - as his principal subject matter. This may seem so obvious as to require no notice. But it is, from the standpoint of advanced, sophisticated thinking in the art world at the threshold of the twenty-first century, something like a polemical gesture. For an entire century, the most important sculpture has been more or less abstract, rendering the human body as an object to be deformed, extruded, deconstructed, fragmented or mutilated. There is no 'human' body anymore: there is the gendered body, the desiring body, the racialized body, the medical body, the sculpted body, the techno-body, the body in pain or pleasure. The human body has come to seem like an infinitely malleable assemblage of prostheses and spare parts, an expression of a 'post-human' sensibility and a 'cyborg' consciousness. [13] The ideal form of the integral body - especially of the white, male body - as expressed in all those familiar diagrams of Renaissance and Romantic humanism - has seemed like an archaism or an exploded ideology to be surpassed or, even worse, a reminder of patriarchal idols and fascist monumentalism that we can do without. A casual encounter with Gormley's work, especially with the castings of his own body for which he is best known, is likely to lead to a snap judgment that his project is retrograde, redundant, a step backward into figurative sculpture and an out-moded humanism, masculinism and egotism. [14] An early admirer 'didn't dare tell anybody' how much he liked Gormley's statues because he 'thought they were very unfashionable'. And indeed they were and are. How dare a contemporary sculptor, in full knowledge of a century's sculptural experimentation which from Constructivism to Minimalism has renounced the 'statue', simply return to the human body, much less his own body, as subject, model and content of his art? Antony Gormley has taken this dare. The results are worth looking at and thinking about.

The first dare is the risk of what cultural theorist Judith Butler calls 'gender trouble'. [15] How can we 'place' the sexual identity of Gormley's statues? Gormley makes castings of his own unambiguously male body. They are sites of male identification, with phallic marks sometimes accentuated. Gormley also has the good (or bad) fortune to possess a rather beautiful, 'sculpturesque' body that inevitably reminds a beholder of the male body as the archaic figure of the idealized, normative human form - the very image that allows us to say 'man' or 'mankind' when we mean 'human'. The primal scene of sculpture in Genesis reinforces this sort of association, the creation of 'man' as the original creative act of the divine artist, the creation of woman as a kind of surgical dismemberment of the male body. The female body is not, in the first instance, sculpted but encased inside the male, to be delivered from the male 'womb' by a kind of Caesarean section. Adam is the first sculptural production, Eve the first reproduction. In Judaeo-Christian myth, man is made, woman is born.

Gormley's work complicates these stereotypes by activating the distinction between sex and gender at both the level of visual appearance and in the productive processes that 'engender' the sculpted object. It is a standard doctrine of feminist theory, notes Judith Butler, that 'whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed'. [16] 'Man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female on'. [17] If Gormley's sculpted figures are 'intractably' coded as biologically male, their postures evoke the 'feminine' codes of passivity, vulnerability, abjection and receptivity. One might say that Gormley has a male body but uses it to express 'feminine' (even perhaps feminist) attitudes. Or that his figures express mixed messages about the relation of sex and gender, the 'intractable' facts of the material, biological body and its 'constructed' cultural form. More fundamentally, his work seems to deconstruct (while evoking) the

differences between sex and gender, nature and culture. How, after all, do we know that the penis 'belongs to' the male of the species? Is its possession necessary or sufficient for 'manhood' or masculinity? As Butler argues, 'Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; genderis also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive".' [18] Gormley makes visible the way the murmur of discourse is woven into the natural materiality of the human body and its sculptural traces. Once this dialectic of sex and gender has been unleashed, as it is in Gormley's body sculptures, it is not so easily stabilized.

An even more fundamental issue is the distinction between the gendering and engendering of human bodies. Real human bodies are both gendered and engendered. They are marked and re-marked by sexual difference and gender identity, but they are produced and reproduced by the interplay of bodies, even by a kind of autopoesis in the case of cloning or parthenogenesis. What about the engendering of sculpture, the processes of its production and reproduction?

There are two traditional ways [19] of making sculpture: carving or moulding from the outside (as in the creation of Adam), and casting from inside out (as in the birth of Eve). [20] Gormley's 'corpographs' work in the second mode. He casts himself in a full-body life mask of plaster; the resulting 'negative' is then used to cast a positive image in molten metal. The shaping tool is not the hand but the artist's entire body, and it works from within matter, holding open a space within it rather than sculpting away material from outside.

Like the Minimalist objects which are among their sculptural ancestors, they refuse all gesture or narrative syntax, forcing the spectator's attention back onto a specific object, this body, understood as a place, a space where someone has lived. [21] This procedure is so simple and obvious that it seems a wonder that no one had ever quite thought of doing it before. Casting the whole body as a life (or death) mask, the self-portrait, the monumentalizing of the human form in the static, standing figure - literally, the statue - all these resources had been available to sculpture, but never combined in quite this way. Why not? Perhaps because the results are visually subtle, even misleading: the casual observer may not know that these are casts of the artist's body and take them simply as generic figurative representations that seem 'old-fashioned' in their archaism and simplicity. Perhaps also because sophisticated viewers dismiss the product for presenting the 'wrong look', no matter how original the process might be. This may be why Gormley often seems to be in the position of denying what seems like a self-evident appearance of his work. He claims that he was never really interested in figurative sculpture per se or even in 'representation' or copying more generally. However, his work does seem thoroughly mimetic and representational, not of the human body as a narrative agent or actor, but as a purely contemplative figure, witnessing and enduring in poses of suspended animation. Gormley subjects the processes of sculptural representation to a critique and re-shaping, so that the apparently familiar, recognizable results (life-size anthropomorphic statues, most notably) radiate a strange sense of inward animation and sentient presence that is the abiding goal of (and phobia about) sculpture. Gormley's figurative statues are 'uncanny' in Freud's sense of the word. That is, they are not visibly weird or grotesque, but 'strangely familiar', both masculine and feminine, heimlich and unheimlich, homely and homeless.

A form of systematic doubleness, a perceptual 'double take', accompanies the experience of Gormley's statues. They are what Walter Benjamin called 'dialectical images', deeply ambiguous figures that fuse contrary forms of affect and interpretation, risking misapprehension so thoroughly that even the artist may seem 'in denial' of what is most manifest and obvious about them.

But Gormley is quite aware that his own work is no mere communication of messages he might want to send. He stresses, in fact, that the process involves a necessary descent into blindness and unknowing. [22] Unlike a sculptor who steps back and looks at his work from outside as he carves it from stone, Gormley immerses himself in the material, encases himself, buries himself alive. He only sees what he has produced after the fact, at which point he has the option of going on with it, casting it further, or casting it aside.

What Gormley shows us, then, is that the body is a place, and that sculpture reveals (or hides) the shape of that place, the invisible interior space where someone lives or has lived. That place may be represented as a positive form, a 'statue' that has to be seen as a kind of embodied darkness (hence, perhaps, the frequent use of lead as material). The minimal form of this inner space is rendered in the INSIDERS series (1996-99), which tries to objectify the internal 'core' of the body by a process of subtraction and paring away, like the paring away of the outer rings of a tree to expose an earlier stage of its development. The obverse of this strategy can be seen in pieces such as RHIZOME I, II and III (1998-99) in which the body's contours are augmented by some determinate quantity, and rendered as a biomorphic casing or 'pod' in which the basic shape of the hidden body has almost become imperceptible. The place of the body has also been indicated as an absence, a negative impression or void, as in BED (1981), or the implied interior of an architectural or biomorphic 'case', as in FLESH (1990), SENSE (1991) and FRUIT (1991-93).

In these latter cases, the sculptural object may remind us of a tomb or a womb, a casket or a seed-pod in which the body is gestating. In the series entitled ALLOTMENT (1997), the exterior is rendered in flat, horizontal surfaces of polished concrete, the only indication of the interior bodily shape being the orifices or holes where bodily appen-dages (feet, hands) might stick out, or the cubic 'capstones' that indicate the relation of head to body. These pieces, which an American viewer can hardly resist associating with the 'cement over-shoes' (or overcoats) of mob executions, are at first glance among the most claustrophobic and chilling of Gormley's inventions. One imagines immediately what it would mean to inhabit the interior spaces of these concrete blocks, to be buried alive in stone. And yet the reference to modern architecture, reinforced when these works are assembled in miniature 'cities' renders them strangely familiar, even homely. It is as if we were suddenly allowed to see the modern apartment house, not as a box full of boxes, but as a box in which a single, unique human form has left its imprint throughout the structure. The effect is like a haunted Modernist high-rise, revealing the ghost within Le Corbusier's 'machine for living'. This 'ghost' or empty space is both the imprint of a specific individual whose body provided the internal shape, and an evocation of the collective body of all the individuals that might inhabit the multiple spaces of such a building over time.

In all these cases (and 'case' here denotes both a physical container and an exemplary instance or problem for study) there is the sense of an impassive, almost featureless exterior hiding an explosive interior, much like the structure of a bomb. The INSIDERS are, as it were, the fuse or 'core' of the charged object; works such as the RHIZOME series foreground the casing as biomorphic pod; in the ALLOTMENT series, the case is altered to refer to modern architecture. As Gormley has noted, 'The perfect form of sculpture is a bomb', a sentiment which again links his projects to the programme of Minimalism, recalling Robert Morris' unrealized Bomb Sculpture, and his treatment of the 'case' as a general sculptural problem. [23]

Inert or explosive objects, dead or living things, industrial relics or palaeontological fossils, individual or generic bodies, gendered or engendered identities, persons or places, archaic or contemporary works of art: the strange power of Gormley's 'statues' resides in the irresolvable tensions they activate among these alternative ways of 'seeing as'. They evoke the immemorial desire of sculpture to come alive as an animated image while resisting all the techniques (gesture, action, motion) that might give literal expression to this desire. Art theorist Stephen Bann puts this in terms relevant to the Second Commandment when he notes that 'Gormley's works … refuse to be idols in the same measure as they assert their right to be

vehicles of presence.' [24]

But this is still only half (at most) of the story. Sculpture wants to be a place, wants to offer us a space for thought and feeling. It provides this place out of its own lack, its abject status or 'place' in the hierarchy of the arts as the medium of brute materiality - iron, lead, cement, mud - or (conversely) in its impression of serene detachment in a meditative, unconscious space beyond desire. But sculpture also wants a place to be, a location where it can be seen, encountered by other bodies. At this point all the dialectics of inner and outer form that have been activated in the shaping of a sculptural object are redoubled in the act of its placement in a setting or landscape. The statue has to find a place to stand. This longing for a place is as crucial to what sculpture wants as the desire that haunts the object itself.

Sites: Place as Sculpture

I placed a jar in Tennessee
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was grey and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

- Wallace Stevens, 'Anecdote of the Jar'

If Gormley's sculpted objects are best seen as sites, they are also what Robert Smithson called 'non-sites' or displaced places. Like many artists of the 1960s, Smithson sought a way of moving out of the space of the gallery into other places - the 'wilderness' of the American West, the post-industrial wastelands of New Jersey. He brought back from these places material samples, geolo-gical maps and photographic documentation which reconstituted the gallery or space of exhibition as a non-site, a place defined by its reference to another place. Gormley does something similar, only in reverse. His mechanically reproduced 'corpographs' are already non-sites in themselves, like three-dimensional photographs that refer to the absent space of a body. These non-sites are then transported to a wide variety of places, some in traditional locations for sculpture (plazas, squares, museums, galleries) others in natural settings, most notably the magnificent blankness and expansiveness of the Australian desert and the tidal mud flats of Cuxhaven, Germany.

Wallace Stevens gives us a sense of the impact of a singular artifact upon a place. The lone figure, especially one stationed as a kind of witness or monitory presence, changes the whole sense of a place. As Heidegger suggests, the sculpted object 'institutes' the place as a human location, a site of gathering, rather than a mere location. For Stevens, the eloquence and power of the figure is inversely proportional to its dramatic or gestural insistence. It is as if the more passive, non-committal and self-absorbed the figure, the more 'dominion' it exerts over the space around it. [25] Another way to see this is to ponder the scale of the human figure against the vastness of space. ANOTHER PLACE (1997), which places Gormley's figures on the tidal flats of Cuxhaven, clearly evokes the pictorial precedent of Caspar David Friedrich's painting Monk by the Sea (1809-10). The tiny figure of the monk against the vastness of the beach, sea and sky may seem at first to declare the insignificance of the figure. But a blink of the eye (or a moment's thought) reverses this impression, turning the landscape into what Gaston Bachelard called an 'intimate immensity'. [26] The landscape becomes an inscape, an interior space all the more evocative for its blankness. [27]

ANOTHER PLACE is notable, moreover, for the way it complicates the Romantic image of the lone, singular figure contemplating the vast, sublime landscape. In this work, Gormley multiplies the figures (as many as a dozen of them may be seen in a single panoramic photograph), dispersing them at intervals of several hundred yards, all facing out to sea. The effect is of a kind of stately procession into oblivion, as if a platoon of sentinels were pausing on their death march for a final look. The advancing and receding tide must enhance this sense that, as the sea rises and falls, the figures are descending into or emerging from the sea. Figure and ground each 'give away' their motion and stillness to the other.

So while the image of the sculpted figure that, like Stephens' jar or Friedrich's monk, 'takes dominion everywhere', dominating and organizing the wilderness, is evoked by Gormley's emplacements, it is not quite what they are after. The effect is more dialectical and interactive, a kind of mutual dislocation. This is most evident, perhaps, in Gormley's gallery installations, which sometimes recall Robert Morris' technique of re-orienting identical minimal objects in a variety of positions within the exhibition space, so that the form of a horizontal 'slab' would become equally a vertical monolith or a 'cloud' suspended from the ceiling.

Although Gormley's work has always been highly sensitive to issues of placement, his site installations in the last decade have been increasingly concerned with addressing the problem of the isolated and monumentalized singular figure. This concern is expressed in several ways: by a multiplication of figures; by an increasing tendency to breach the boundaries of the integral body; by an enhancement of the sense of 'alienness' and homelessness surrounding the figures, an expression of longing for place that remains rigorously and on principle unsatisfied by any particular location. An installation like CRITICAL MASS, for instance, means one thing in a tram shed in Vienna (Stadtraum Remise, 1995), quite another in the courtyard of the Royal Academy in London (1998). In the Viennese setting, the combination of scattered, half-interred, suspended and witnessing bodies could evoke memories of the Holocaust among other associations. In London, the figures undercut the monumentality and heroism of the Western art traditions linked with the Academy. 'They're body forms without a place', Gormley notes, [28] that have been deliberately strewn and sewn like random seeds, eliciting the participation of a viewer who senses their incom-pleteness, latency and displacement. This last effect is perhaps most noticeable in the 'street' installa¬tions entitled TOTAL STRANGERS (1996) that place figures both inside the traditional aesthetic space of the gallery and in the street, stationed as if they were homeless vagrants peering into shop windows or drunks sleeping off the night's excess in the lee of a building.

Photographs of interactions by passers-by with these figures are most telling. They suggest an intimacy and familiarity coupled with strangeness and dislocation. In contrast to the assertively central placement of typical public monuments (which are, as a consequence, usually ignored) Gormley's 'marginal' placements of figures where we would least expect them have the effect of producing a double-take, not unlike the shock one might feel on encountering George Segal figures in a park, or a hyper-realist figure by John De Andrea. The difference is that Segal depends on gestures of action, and De Andrea on a kind of trompe-l'oeil effect, a literal shock at taking something as alive that turns out to be a simulacrum. With Gormley, there is no simulation of the visual appearance of life. The works assert their status as statues, affirming the muteness and stillness of sculpture. If his figures 'simulate' anything like life, it is a transitional zone of sentience between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Gormley's most dramatic departure from the focus on his own figure isolated in a space has been the series of works known as FIELD (1991-95), which evokes a whole range of precedents in Minimalist sculpture, recalling a variety of earthworks and non-sites, especially Walter de Maria's 'earth rooms' of the mid 1970s, and the emphasis on seriality, the body and space. It has been read as a host of lost (or saved?) souls assembling for the last judgment, as the incarnate spirits of unborn foetuses yearning for incarnation, as the resurrected victims of the Holocaust demanding justice, as a parable of the specific sites from which these figures emerge as a kind of local 'earthwork', or as a global allegory of displacement and diaspora, as if the 'huddled masses' of immigrants, exiles, homeless and refugees were all assembled in a single space. Each of these interpretive frameworks casts the spectator in a different role as well, inviting us to bask in the glow of mass attention or recoil from the sense of accusation and impossible demand. The 'double takes' elicited by Gormley's singular figures are vastly multiplied with this work and have an effect (which Winckelmann observed in the highest achievements of Classical sculpture) of fascination and astonishment - quite literally, a momentary turning of the spectator into something like a statue, stunned into contemplative stillness.

The notion of 'collective representation', the condensation of a social totality into a single gestalt, is central to what the anthropologist Emile Durkheim called 'totemism'. [29] Totems occupy a 'middle' place in the realm of sacred objects: unlike idols they are generally not images of gods but of sacred animals or plants; unlike fetishes, they are not associated with body parts, obsession or magical ritual but are integral forms linked with the identity of a community or tribe. The totem is literally (in its origin in the Ojibway language) 'a relative of mine', a figure that mediates social difference (exogamous sexual relations, tribal distinctions) with a sense of social solidarity and collective identity. (William Blake's figure of the giant Albion, who contains the whole universe in his body, is an important English precedent.) Gormley's rendering of the 'body of the multitude' (a 'host' in another sense) is another of his forays into the most archaic sculptural traditions. [30] This figure receives its most ominous modern rendering in the title page of Hobbes' Leviathan, where the social totality is 'personated' and embodied in the figure of a giant man, the sovereign who contains a multitude inside his body. Hobbes' collective figure, like Gormley's, seems to rise out of the earth, but FIELD has no unitary, integral, sovereign shape - except, of course, for the one that is given to it by the beholder. The spectator's body plays the role of Hobbes' Leviathan, insofar as the spectator frames the mass assembly in some subjective gestalt (a narrative or way of 'seeing as'). The closest Gormley comes to the totalitarian overtones of Leviathan as collective giant is his BRICK MAN (1987), which resonates both with the signs of collectivity (the bricks as the individuals in the social body) and the aura of the monolithic idol.

The combination of collective, local authorship and involvement, and the sheer visual power of the work, its rather demotic accessibility to many kinds of beholders and interpretations, make FIELD into one of the most successful public art projects of its time. FIELD is not only for, but in a certain sense of and by the masses, asserting the democracy of artistic imagination and the possibility that the sculptural 'genius of the place' might be formed by its own inhabitants. Gormley serves, in that case, more like a gastarbeiter than a visiting 'art star', a guest-worker who assists in the process of instituting a place.

His most recent large public works, ANGEL OF THE NORTH and QUANTUM CLOUD, continue this process of 'outreach' beyond the boundaries of the cast body and the conventional spaces of artistic exhibition. The ANGEL OF THE NORTH literally spreads its wings in the highly traditional gesture of welcoming and opening, combining what are by now the familiar polarities of Gormley's work. The angel opens its wings for flight, yet it stands firmly anchored to resist winds of up to 100 miles per hour. It combines an archaic rendering of the human form with the modern, technical prostheses of airplane wings. It expresses both the earth- bound, gravitational pull of sculpture and its transcendental, aerial, utopian idealism. Of all Gormley's public works it is the one that has sparked the most violent controversy, serving as the focus of the usual battles over the waste of public money on the arts. Villified for its size (20 metres high, 54 metre wing span, 100 tons of reinforced steel), its monumentality (some critics associated it with Albert Speer and fascist monuments); its expense; its danger as a distraction to the 90,000 motorists who pass it every day on the A1 road; its danger as a magnet for lightning; and even its suggestion of a porno-graphic image (one critic saw in it a flasher opening his trench coat), the ANGEL OF THE NORTH has nonetheless rapidly achieved acceptance and a kind of landmark status. Some works of public art seem destined to undergo this kind of ritual of humiliation and sanctification. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial is perhaps the most notable and moving example of this transformation from reviled to revered monument. Already it seems that the question about the ANGEL OF THE NORTH is not 'What does it mean?', but 'How did it become a totem of this place?' Beyond the obvious resonance with the spread-eagled figure of the thunderbird often found on Native American totem poles, the ANGEL OF THE NORTH expresses a resonance with its abandoned, post-industrial, wasteland site that helps to institute and resurrect it as place.

What will be the fate of QUANTUM CLOUD, Gormley's latest project? An intricate assemblage of square steel tubes welded at precisely determined angles, this work flaunts its status as a technical, engineering marvel, as if it were the interior skeleton of a Modernist skyscraper caught at the moment of shattering. And yet hidden within this futuristic storm of steel is the vague silhouette of the totemic, monumental human form, a figure whose relation to any conceivable 'ground' has been rendered perfectly indeterminate, dispersed in a kind of aureole that reminds us of the radiant field around sacred icons.

The site and scale of QUANTUM CLOUD will put it in competition with Nelson's Column, Westminster Bridge, Big Ben and other London landmarks. Will this be taken as an image of the digitized, cybernetic body, abstracted into a cloud of 'quanta' or bits of materialized information? Will it be taken as a totemic figure of what critic Tom Nairn has called 'the breakup of Britain' - Albion deconstructed? [31] If it is like Gormley's other public pieces, it will both invite and frustrate allegories of this kind, serving as a demotic invitation to enter a place for thought in the heart of urban distraction. As a continuation of Gormley's effort to 'think with materials' and with the sculpted body, it expresses his current tendency to move beyond his own body. The visual impression, in fact, is that of the body breaking up and dispersing in a cloud of steel segments (one could also read this, of course, as an image of convergence, as if the segments were like giant iron filings coalescing around the magnetic field left by an absent, almost invisible body). Once again the body is a place, but this time one whose boundaries are indeterminate, exploding or imploding, expanding or contracting. Perhaps that perfect shape for sculpture, the bomb, has 'gone off' in this work.

If one believes in linear, progressive narratives of artistic careers, one might conclude that QUANTUM CLOUD signals the end of Gormley's entrapment in his own body and the beginning of a new phase in which the body, the human figure and the traditional sculptural choices of casting

and carving have been replaced by or refunctioned as construction and assembly. The welded totems of David Smith and the entire Constructivist tradition in sculpture might be hovering about this cluster of steel tubes. But Gormley has already been 'out of his body' for over a decade and, more importantly, the story to be told about his work is not so much a matter of what he wants, but what sculpture seems to want from him. The general answer seems clear: Gormley's sculpture wants a place to be and to be a place. Where and in what form this desire will be gratified remains to be seen.

1 Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Artists (1568), Penguin Books, London, 1965, p. 25
2 Exodus, Book 20, Verses 4-5, King James Bible (1611)
3 Giorgio Vasari, op. cit., p. 26
4 Ibid.
5 Antony Gormley, conversation with the author, 2000
6 Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture I', Artforum, Vol 4, No 6, New York, February, 1966, p. 42
7 Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', Artforum, Vol 5, New York, Summer, 1967
8 'Sculpture would not deal with space … Sculpture would be the embodiment of places.' Martin Heidegger, 'Art and Space', trans. Charles Seibert, Man and World I, Harper & Row, New York, 1973, pp. 3-5
9 Martin Heidegger, 'Art and Space', op. cit., p. 6
10 Ibid.
11 For further reflections on the question of desire and lack in representational forms see my essay, 'What Do Pictures Really Want?', October, No. 77, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Summer, 1996, pp. 71-82
12 I am concerned to avoid the kind of historicism (marked by the 'post-' and the 'pre-' that reduces the history of an art or medium to two phases separated by a 'rupture' located in the period that happens to correspond to the historian's field of specialization. For more on this, see 'The Pictorial Turn', Picture Theory, University of Chicago Press, 1994, especially pp. 22-23
13 See Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman, University of Chicago Press, 1999; See also Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', Simians, Cyborgs and Women, Routledge, New York and London, 1991
14 Gormley has said that he likes 'the idea that the body is an integrity. That you accept it as an integrated system', a remark that seems directed against the notion of the body as an arbitrary construction or heterogeneous assemblage. See Gormley/Theweleit, Schleswig-Holsteinischer Kunstverein and Kunsthalle zu Kiel, Germany, 1999, p. 89
15 See Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex, Routledge, New York and London, 1993
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 I put to the side for the moment a 'third way' that works by assembly and construction.
20 If we locate the Adam and Eve analogy at the intersection of gender and engendering, we would have to say that while Adam is the first man from the standpoint of gender, he is also mother of Eve from the standpoint of engendering. These ambiguities of gender and reproduction are made marvelously complex in films like the Alien trilogy, which render the alien as an egg-laying dragon queen who implants her hatchlings to 'gestate' in the bodies of men and women, or Invasion of the Body Snatchers, in which zombie-like 'pod people' are engendered by a process of vegetative transfer of vital fluids through vines and tendrils. See Klaus Theweleit on the uncanny resemblance between some of Gormley's sculpture and these deadly pods in Gormley/Theweleit, op. cit., pp. 59, 113
21 One reason the tradition of assembled or constructed sculpture (David Smith, Anthony Caro, Cubist and Surrealist sculpture) seems antithetical to Gormley's practice is that it almost inevitably produces a sense of gesture and syntax in the figure, making it a body that acts in space rather than simply 'being there', which is, I take it, Gormley's aim.
22 Gormley describes his casting process as 'putting on the clothes of the dead and then being cut out'. Critical Mass, Stadtraum Remise, Vienna, 1995, p. 157
23 See Critical Mass, op. cit., p. 162. See also my discussion of Morris' treatment of the 'case' as a general sculptural problem, and the specific issue of the bomb casing, in Picture Theory, op. cit., chapter 8
24 Stephen Bann, Antony Gormley: Still Moving, Works 1975-1996, Japan Association of Art Museums, 1996, p. 132
25 I'm reminded here of the contrast between Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen's ways of relating to an audience. Springsteen is a constant whirlwind of energy, passion and insistence, reaching out directly to the audience. Dylan (far more effectively, in my view) almost seems indifferent to the presence of the audience, focused on some incommunicable relation to his own words and music. Perhaps this is what Michael Fried's categories of 'absorption' and 'theatricality' really come down to.
26 Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space (1958), Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, chapter 8
27 See Stephen Bann's evocation of Friedrich's Monk and the Sea in 'The Raising of Lazarus', Antony Gormley, Malmö Konsthall, Sweden, 1993, p. 71
28 Antony Gormley, Critical Mass, op. cit.
29 Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912), trans. Karen Fields, Free Press, New York, 1995
30 Comparisons have been drawn with the terracotta army of Xian, China, the thousand bodhisattvas in Kyoto, Japan, and (in a contemporary context) with the mass produced 'surrogates' of Allan McCollum and the 'ranks of humanoid shells' of Magdalena Abakanovics. See Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leith, 'A Place Where Thought Might Grow', Antony Gormley: Field for the British Isles, Oriel Mostyn, Llandudno, Wales, 1994, pp. 24-26
31 Tom Nairn, The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism, New Left Books, London, 1977