ANTONY GORMLEY

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Three figures on the moist and shiny sand: one standing upright, one crouching, and one kneeling. They form a group, but at the same time each seems enclosed in a silence of its own. Each one alone with its own shadow, waiting immutably. Waiting for what?

No artwork has given me so distinct an impression of time as Antony Gormley's LAND, SEA AND AIR II from 1982. Time passing, following like an invisible river, all-encompassing and still inaccessible. Each of the figures seems deeply concentrated. One puts the ear to the ground, one gazes out towards the sea, one seems intent to breathe in the atmosphere in its entirety. Nothing happens, has happened, or will ever happen. Nothing but this one thing: Time.

Where does this scene take place – in a distant future or in an archaic past? Three figures at the edge of the sea, recently awakened from a prehistoric slumber, or perhaps waiting for the final disappearance which an apocalyptic thinker of our own times has chosen to phrase as a quiet deletion:

"Then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea." [Michel Foucault, Les mots et les choses]

Awakening or erasure? In Gormley's case the two don't necessarily exclude each other. He tells us no stories, neither about the birth of consciousness, nor about the death of the subject. Instead, he captures intense states. His art is not about a threatened humanism; rather, he repeatedly recreates a place of intense physical sensation. Gormley is a phenomenologist, although hardly of the orthodox variety. The dream of phenomenological philosophy in its various guises (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) has been to capture lived experience in all its richness. Rather than developing abstract theories about the world, the phenomenologist endeavours to make accessible what is already there, in the continuous flow of experience. Phenomenology teaches you nothing new, but instead makes you conscious of what, in a sense, you already know. In a similar vein, Gormley's works make tangible and conspicuous what is already part of you. They display themselves, but simultaneously – according to a powerful law of reflexivity – they show you who you yourself are.

The human body functions as a given point of departure – given in the sense of a ready-made: something which is already there – but is not something that has to be revered. On the contrary, the body appears as a zone for experiment and transformation. With Gormley's words: "To make concrete the life that goes on inside the head one can't stay within classical proportions." His displacements of the classical humanistic body – inscribed as it appears in Leonardo da Vinci's circle – follows various courses. The body is stretched in a ridiculous way and grows long arms (FIELD, 1984-85) or an absurdly long neck (TREE, 1984); or else the physical conditions in the room are altered in such a radical way that the body leaves the humanist parameters altogether – it hovers in the air or hangs on the wall in a fashion that defies the laws of gravity. What is specific for Gormley's sculptures is that not only are they about the body (like so much recent art of the West), but they are also experienced with the body, in a visceral and concrete sense. His works must be seen on the spot. Or rather, felt on the spot. It's only then that their energies propagate into the anatomy of the beholder.

Maybe this is true of most works of art, but in Gormley's case even the recollection of a piece incites a visceral response. I can still recall the strange feeling of weightlessness his works created in me the very first time I encountered them. A crouching figure far up on one of the walls gave rise to a sensation strong enough to shift the gravitational conditions in the room. A peculiar lightness could be felt in arms and legs. This, I imagine, is as close as I will ever come to levitation.

Gormley's art encompasses the body in its entirety, and he turns against art's traditional emphasis on the gaze. In his cosmos the hegemony of the eye is disputed: "I question the notion that retinal response is the only channel of communication in art, and the notion that objects are discrete entities. I want the work to activate the space around it and engender a psycho-physical response, allowing those in its field of influence to be more aware of their bodies and surroundings."

This may sound like a version of the broadened form of phenomenology the French thinker Maurice Merleau-Ponty sought to develop: a philosophy which does not confine itself to the reports of the eye, but takes the other sense into account as well. Merleau-Ponty prophesied a future form of thought which would probe deeper than science and traditional philosophy, which are limited by their rigid dichotomies of body and soul, nature and

spirit, object and subject. A more profound dimension, both preceding the dichotomies and making them possible, will emerge through an original form of vision, best exemplified by the magical gaze of the painter: “Painting awakens and carries to its highest pitch a delirium which is vision itself” [Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" in The Primacy of Perception]. In a series of texts he returns to this original form of vision, which “opens” or “discloses” the world in a more fundamental way than the narrowly theoretical gaze. His recurrent example are the paintings of Cézanne, which do not dissolve the worldly objects into a flicker of sensations, but, rather, manage to capture ordinary things in all their richness: “We see depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects. Cézanne even claimed that we see their odour” [Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt" in Sense and Non-sense]. The painter is, if we may believe Merleau-Ponty, a better phenomenologist than any philosopher. Cézanne seizes the objects in their very first “awakening”, he teaches us what it is to see.

Cézanne’s painting has the powerful ability to make visible a world of which the viewer feels he is already a part. What they present are not only visible things, but just as much visibility itself: they make you see how you see. In the realm of light, space, and vision his works exemplify a kind of reflexivity similar to that of Gormley’s sculptural works. The medium of the latter, however, is not light and vision, but the invisible space of bodily darkness. Behind the eye, deeper than daylight.

The critique of vision can, in Gormley’s case, no doubt be linked to a more general critique of Modernity: “I think the whole history of man since the Enlightenment is one of control: of the world, understood as an object out there, of vision requiring distance which promotes knowledge. My work tries to create a place of feeling, which is in contrast to objective rationalism.” Here, Gormley seems quite close to Merleau-Ponty, who attempted to distance himself from the Cartesian tradition’s emphasis on the theoretical gaze and its reduction of the world to an object of scientific investigation.

The ambivalent position of the eye in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy has often been emphasised: on the one hand he wants to disentangle himself from the traditional reign of the eye, but on the other hand he seems incapable of phrasing his philosophy without re-installing the priority of the gaze. He has been called “the philosopher of the body”, and perhaps the tension – not to say the impossibility – is to be found exactly here, in the will to capture the truth of the body in the medium of theory. Maybe what one can learn from this is that philosophy at this very point must leave itself behind, and take the necessary step into a different kind of investigation – that of art. I can think of no better pathfinder for this excursion than Antony Gormley. If Merleau-Ponty’s words about the artist have ever been valid, they are certainly valid for Gormley: he is a better phenomenologist than any philosopher.

Gormley’s art has the ability to make the viewer conscious of very basic experiential conditions concerning space, time, and the body in a way that no intellectually communicated information can. The position of one’s own body no longer appears as a mere fact of geometry, but involves an inner density which seems unfathomable from a strictly objective point of view. One is reminded of that irreducible “internal” space of the body itself, an inner darkness following us wherever we go – a spatiality of an altogether different kind than that of the visually given, which continuously relates to external space without being reducible to what is measurable. Gormley’s sculptural works make this inner space accessible in a way that transcends the domain of the gaze. They show what cannot be seen.

A challenge to the supremacy of vision has been a comprehensive movement in twentieth-century European Art. Among the early champions, formulating the critique in various art forms and genres, one finds Marcel Duchamp and several artists in the vicinities of Surrealism, such as Luis Buñel and Georges Bataille. At times this revolt materialised in images so radical as to verge on the unbearable. But the critique of the eye has not always been phrased in aggressive terms, but at times has taken the form of positive alternatives to the dominant tradition that Duchamp disparagingly called ‘retinal’. Gormley’s art belongs to the latter form: he does not attack the eye, but instead offers a wider spectrum. A genealogy of this interest in bodily experience no doubt passes through the work of artists such as Yves Klein, Jannis Kounnellis, and Joseph Beuys, back to Duchamp and the Surrealists.

Perhaps it is possible to situate Gormley’s work at the crossing of two traditions; that of the “primordial gaze” and that of the Duchampian ready-made. The body is treated as something given, but is not reduced to the status of a mere object. Rather, the assortment of ready-mades is extended so as to include the embodied subject, imbued with all sensory capabilities: a found space, capable of sublime communication.

To enter one of Gormley’s rooms is like coming into a phenomenological laboratory. He has a unique ability of bringing about fields of energy that make immense objects appear as virtually weightless – for instance the large spheres in THREE THOUGHTS – whereas others rest on the ground with a seemingly infinite mass. This is nothing one infers, but rather something which is felt in an immediate and visceral way.

The emphasis on the human body is a feature Gormley shares with contemporary artists as different from one another as Bruce Nauman, Charles Ray, Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, and Louise Bourgeois. These names are often mentioned as representative for a strong trend in contemporary art: an accentuation of physicality. Although not unrelated, it is, however, conceivable that Gormley has more in common with artists whose work does not explicitly treat the human figure, but succeeds in giving expression to a form of reflexivity which makes the artwork felt as a part of the viewer’s own being. Two such non-figurative artists who come to mind are Richard Serra and James Turrell, who both create spaces that by no means represent

the body, but none the less change the experience of your own body if you enter them.

Let us for a moment dwell on Bourgeois, whose roots can be traced back to French Surrealism, but who during the last two decades has emerged as one of the seminal artists of the late twentieth century. Her art has a more conspicuous psychoanalytic dimension than Gormley's, and the sexual problematic is more stressed. But a comparison between the two can be of interest, perhaps not so much because of their common emphasis on the body, but rather because of the presence in their work of another theme: Time.

For almost half a century, Bourgeois has returned to the same topics: childhood, sexuality, and memories of the mother, and, perhaps even more important, of the both loved and detested father figure. Her sculptures have an obtrusive physical presence, like large fruits or organisms vibrating with ambivalent energies, attractive and repulsive at once. Large parts of her production seem to receive their power from the complicated relation to the father, clearly a deceitful and unpleasant man – constantly unfaithful, and capable of new painful surprises. Bourgeois describes how, as a young girl, she is reborn as an artist: "Once we were sitting together at the dining table, I took white bread, mixed it with spit, and moulded a figure of my father. When the figure was done, I started cutting off the limbs with a knife, I see this as my first sculptural solution." This scene returns over and over again in Bourgeois's production, and appears in its most explosive form in The Destruction of the Father (1974). The body of the father is torn to pieces, his limbs lie scattered in the room. He is finally defeated, he exists no more.

It is not often that one can discern an artists's "primal scene" this clearly. Is there anything comparable in Gormley's development, a theme which in an equally decisive way puts its imprint on the production as a whole? Hardly a scene of such autobiographical intensity, but none the less a very distinct one. Many of his works create an atmosphere which first seems to emerge in a group of works dating from the late 1970s. It is during this period that Gormley starts working with lead, and all of those early works are encapsulations: layers of lead envelop various objects – conceal, shelter, and conserve them. The state of mind these work conjure up, and out of which they seem to emanate, can perhaps best be designated melancholy.

The intense awareness of time which Gormley's work yields no doubt has a relation to the melancholic state, such as it has been defined in the literature, from antiquity to contemporary theorists such as Jean Starobinski and Julia Kristeva. What is melancholy? In ancient Greece, it was described as an ambivalent state which comprises darkness and depression as well as inspiration and insight. The Platonic concept of a holy mania was associated with melancholy as the creative state par excellence. According to the Greek doctrine of the four bodily fluids, the melancholic temperament is produced by the presence of too much black bile in the body. Black bile can put the soul in a state of divine inspiration, but in the next moment it can degenerate into bestial frenzy. Across the centuries a large number of attributes have been associated with the melancholic, who thus received a well defined place in an increasingly complicated cosmological system; the planet of the melancholic is Saturn, his metal is lead.

Gormley is far form being the only artist who in recent time has chosen to work in lead, but very few have done it with comparable consistency; and hardly anyone has created works in lead so conspicuously related to the theme of melancholy. The protecting encapsulations of the sculptures seize an intense feeling of the destructive force of time, but also conveying a hope for survival. Fruits of the EARTH (1978-79) and LAND, SEA and AIR I (1977-79) are both triads: three leaden bodies, sealed and enigmatic like vessels of time. They envelop something, preserve it for the future, and, thus, point both backwards and ahead: at a past which is conserved, like a seed or a hardly pronounced promise: and at a threatening future to which the leaden coat offers protection.

While Bourgeois's works attempt to free themselves from the past through a violent act, reminiscent of the mythological killing and devouring of the "primal father" described by Freud in "Totem and Taboo" (1912), Gormley's treatment of the past is less brutal, but no less intense. The autobiographical dimension of his work is not as salient as in Bourgeois' case, but there are single elements, such as the revolver in Fruits of the Earth, which was his father's from the First World War. Here, the father is not destroyed but, rather, concentrated.

In the modern discussion concerning melancholy, psychoanalysis has played an important role. In the essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1915) Freud posits a theory of melancholy as an unsuccessful form of mourning. The melancholic person is not capable of recovering from an original loss, but instead tries to retain the beloved object on a symbolic level, incorporating it in an imaginary fashion. The melancholic, according to Freud, is orally fixated. The lost object has been incorporated through the mouth: the melancholic is a symbolic cannibal. He or she – in Freud's case the melancholic primarily seems to be a he - has devoured the beloved object. He has assimilated and made it his own.

A large number of Gormley's works in lead seem intent on preventing a threatening loss: the objects are retained and protected through layers of melancholic lead. They are kept in dark crypts where they can withstand the destructive forces of time. If Freud's theory of oral incorporation is taken seriously, then other early works can be seen as related to the melancholic theme as well. These works concern the mouth in a very direct way: in BREAD LINE (1979) a loaf of bread has been bitten into pieces, and lined up bite after bite; in BED (1980-81) he has eaten himself into a bed consisting of white bread, creating two cavities equalling the volume of his own body. Thus, in these early works the body of the artist appears in a rather untraditional fashion. The body – in this case the mouth – has been used as a tool, creating traces that are not representations but direct

imprints of the artist's physical features.

What loss do Gormley's works mourn? Hardly the disappearance of a worldly object, but rather something at once more general and more devastating: the loss inscribed in the movement of temporality itself. As a meditation over time they have two aspects: on the one hand they give expression to time as a principle of destruction – captured already by Goya with unforgettable brutality in his 1820 printing "Saturn devouring his own child" – on the other hand they treat time as a principle of creation and hope. Thus, melancholy in Gormley's case implies not only an intense awareness of the past, but just as much an expectant openness towards worlds not yet born.

Present, past and future – the dialectic triad of temporality recurs on several levels. "Art is always for the future", writes Gormley. But the future in question carries the past inside. His lead cases hide something very old. One is often reminded of the story of Chronos, according to the myth, devoured his offspring, until his spouse, Rhea, finally fooled him into devouring a stone instead, thus saving the life of their son, Zeus. Could the stone in LAND, SEA and AIR I be this Saturnine stone, saved from the stomach of time? And could one think of a better paradigm for sculptural work than this stone?

The work consists of three leaden cases beaten on a stone. But only one of the shells actually contains the stone in question. In the other two there is water and air respectively. Earth, water, air. What is missing in this enumeration is the fourth element: fire. But perhaps fire is already present, as soon as anything is received by the viewer in the form of the sparkle of the mind. That at least seems to be the view of one of the oldest voices of the West, Heraclitus: "The soul is composed of fire." Thomas McEvilley hints at the alchemic dimension in the early works in lead, and ultimately in Gormley's production as a whole [Thomas McEvilley, "The Seeds of the Future, the Art of Antony Gormley," in Field]. In the encounter with the sparkle of the beholder the process is triggered off: the heavy and immutable lead is transformed, it becomes agile, light and full of life.

It is interesting to observe how Gormley's very distinct sensibility emerges in works that do not yet take the human figure as their point of departure. The encapsulation of objects is developed in NATURAL SELECTION (1981), which seems to want to heal the division between natural processes and technological work. Here a long line of fruits and vegetables of increasing size, interspersed with tools and weapons, have been given a cloak of lead. The very idea of a cloak which covers and reproduces a given shape had already been elaborated in FULL BOWL (1977-78), where a large number of lead bowls encircle each other like annual rings. Each bowl functions as the matrix to the one inside it, thereby creating a layered cosmos with a centre of radiating blackness. Is this a place prior to time, a black hole "older" than temporality itself?

The annual rings return in another piece from the same period, entitled FLAT TREE (1978). A tree trunk has been cut into thin discs arranged on the floor in a large spiral. Each disc demonstrates the history of the tree up to a given point in time; together they make available the temporality of the tree in all its aspects. The tree is deprived of all inner secrets – everything is made accessible. We see the traces of time, slice after slice of annual rings. But where is time itself?

Questions concerning the nature and enigmatic origin of time recur constantly in Gormley's work. The large wall drawing EXERCISE BETWEEN BLOOD AND EARTH (1979-81) and the rubber piece FLOOR (1981) both continue the layer technique from FULL BOWL. But here the starting points bear human traits: a drawing of a running man or the foot prints of the artist himself. Layer after layer is added, until the original form disappears in the pattern of annual rings. It is as if the individual imprint has been encapsulated by layers of temporal experience; finally the personal signature dissolves into the limitless layering of time.

These early works seem to prepare the ground for the appearance of the human figure, which constitutes the dominant theme in Gormley's work since the early 1980s. In THREE WAYS: MOULD, HOLE and PASSAGE (1981) the very first body-case work, we find three leaden objects that are reminiscent of the arrangement in LAND, SEA and AIR I and other triads from the same period, but this time the bodies are human figures assuming different positions on the floor. One body case lies poised in the position of a foetus, as if not yet born, one lies on its back, as if already dead. The third, in a position that turns the body into a triangular shape, may represent life itself. The work therefore appears to mirror the dialectic triad of temporality: past, present and future. But that obviously is not the whole story, since the "dead" man has an erect penis, capable of creating new life and, thus, closing the circle and turning what appeared as the end into a new beginning. At their highest points – mouth, penis, and anus – the cases have openings, so as to make a vertical flow of energy possible.

Many of the works in lead, and iron as well, present the human figure in overwhelming variety. This, however, does not imply that Gormley's mature work exemplifies a traditional humanism. The human figure does not appear as an unchangeable and eternally valid form. On the contrary, one sometimes gets the impression that the human figure is but an effect of external forces capable of altogether different constellations. From such a perspective, man would appear not as a self-sufficient centre, but rather as a result of forces more original than human subjectivity.

In Gormley's case, what is most important is not whether the human proportions are respected or not. His critique of Humanism – taken as the view of Man as the measure of all things – is put into question on a much more fundamental level. His works take possession of the viewer in a way that

makes the very distinction between Man, understood as a sovereign subject, and World appear as anything but self-evident. What they conjure up is, rather, the Heideggerian idea of a profound “belonging-together” of Man and Being. Being is given to man. Man belongs to Being, and is not thinkable outside of this relation [Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in Basic Writings]. Such is the principle of reflexivity, to which Gormley’s work seems to adhere.

Michael Foucault’s famous lines about man being but a temporary constellation soon to be replaced by other forms of life, have inspired theorists to quite daring prophesies. While Foucault usually confines himself to examinations of the various ways human beings have “constructed” themselves in different epochs and cultures, his colleague and friend Gilles Deleuze ventures one step further, and prophecies about post-human and as yet unheard of forms of “subjectivity”. Deleuze inquires, “What happens when the energies of life merge with the third generation of cybernetic machines?”; “What happens when organic chemistry coalesces with the silicon-based systems of artificial intelligence?” A new form of life may emerge – neither human nor machine, neither animal nor god! At this point Deleuze restrains himself and warns that one has to “look out, so as not to end up on the level of the comic strip.” [Gilles Deleuze, Pourparlers]

This risk is present not only in theory, but just as much in recent art. The interest in hybrids of man and machine has given rise to increasingly sensational creatures on the borders between artefact and organism, automaton and mythological animal. A major international exhibition titled “Post-human”, which recently travelled large parts of Europe, surveyed the interest in artificial life in contemporary art. However fascinating and entertaining, the risk of ending up on the level of the comic strip was everywhere present. ["Post-Human," curated by Jeffrey Deitsch, 1992]

Although testing the parameters of the human, Gormley’s art does not seem to run the risk. A work that clearly displaces the human figure, and pushes it towards the regions of the machine is A CASE FOR AN ANGEL II (1990), a mythological creature in the border zone between man, bird, and aeroplane. The work is, however, not exhausted by these associations. Its power does not spring from the sensationalism of its hybridity, but from spatial conditions that affect the viewer in a much more direct fashion. Even when clearly transcending humanism, Gormley remains a phenomenologist. This angel is as far as you can get from the entertaining transformations of the comic strip – with great authority it takes possession not only of the room, but more importantly, of the viewer himself.

The will to transcend man, a recurrent dream not only in art, but since Nietzsche in philosophy as well, can be discerned in several recent works. In LEARNING TO THINK (1991), five lead body cases hover in the air, their heads disappearing through the ceiling. Five levitating bodies without heads, mutilated or perhaps rather liberated from the oppression of the intellect. Maybe one can interpret them in the light of Georges Bataille’s mythology of the creature without a head, the acéphale. For Bataille this figure embodies a dream of a life beyond modern man, who is kept captive in the prison of rationality: “Man has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from his prison. He has found beyond himself not God, who is the prohibition against crime, but a being who is unaware of prohibition. Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless…”. [Georges Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy," in Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927 - 1939]

This is Bataille’s version of Nietzsche’s Übermensch: a creature no longer burdened by the weight of history, who has leaped into a post-historic space freed from the terror of memory. The acéphale, according to Bataille, is a being who affirms the body, and instead of losing himself in the labyrinth of the soul, devotes himself to the glory of his own entrails: “He is not a man. He is not God either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself…” When writing these ecstatic lines, Bataille has André Masson’s 1936 drawing “Acéphale” in mind: a human figure without head, but with a maze-like stomach.

In SOVEREIGN STATE (1989-90) a stylized leaden figure, lying on the ground, is connected to a complex system of tubes, attached to the bodily orifices; the inner maze has been externalised into a muddle of rubber tubes. Gormley’s works sometimes evoke Bataille’s fantasies, although some of his sculptures could also be seen as humorous comments on the futility of such dreams of violent transgression: the heads are no longer visible in LEARNING TO THINK, but that does not necessarily free the bodies from their earthly confines. Hanging in mid-air, they look rather dependent.

Gormley is no Nietzschean anti-humanist. In his case it is not a question of transcending man in the violent fashion of Bataille. Perhaps his work is rather trying to conjure up a form of human being not yet born. Not an irrational creature without head, but rather a body inhabited by a mind intent on something quite different from controlling its world.

In a series of works in concrete, human traces are hidden within the cavities of the large blocks. In IMMERSION (1991) and PASSAGE (1993), man can be glimpsed as a form of absence inside the inhospitable concrete. The scarce traces of the body acquire great intensity through the unlikely fusion of human frailty and the mute brutality of cement. An ambivalent fascination of a similar kind is kindled by a series of recent works in cast iron, where the human figure is encapsulated by layers so thick as to make his features invisible. The immense mass of these iron works could be thought of as a threat, but strangely enough they create a feeling of confidence. Man is hidden deep inside, preserved for the future. Like a memory of something which has not yet taken place.
