

ANTONY GORMLEY

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID PEAT

On www.fdaavidpeat.com (1996)

We began discussing the way in which creative work begins within the physical body, frequently in the form of muscular tensions. During the gestation of the work these tensions have to be contained within the body.

Antony Gormley: I believe this. It's like giving birth. This thing is held and given form though being registered in the body. There is an accommodation in the body of the thing we have to do.

David Peat: The body plays a big role in your work. When you are making a cast what exactly do you do in preparation?

AG: I try not to get too.... This morning we made the case for Angel. The period of preparation was very important. I knew it had to be with the chest fully inflated. I had to concentrate very, very hard on keeping the vertical that goes into the ground, and on the idea of the extension. The idea of the front of the body being extended. And for the first time I used mirrors as a register. As a matter of fact I put my back out!

DP: Part of this space is not external. It's an internal space that the body occupies and we don't see from the outside.

AG: It's the other side of appearance. I was reading a paper by Stephen Levinson, director of a school of anthropology. He wrote a paper on Kant, turning up to a tribe of Navahos.

There are two theories about space - Newtonian absolute and independent. Then Leibnitz who said it is relationship. Kant said both may be true but its only experienced subjectively and our whole way of thinking about left right, front etc is in relation to our bodies and we project that onto space.

I started thinking that all of that can be inverted. Our bodies are created by the potential of three dimensions. We become registers of an idea about space that is only experienced by the body. The space I'm interested in, and try to enter, is adimensional. It doesn't have this quality of dimension and it makes no sense to say "in front, behind, left, right." You lose all sense of those kinds of coordinates.

That enlightenment idea of understanding the principles by which life is sustained has little to do with the space I'm interested in. Its a kind of... a darkness without fear. It may contain the possibility of evil but in some curious way, because you have entered voluntarily, the experience of it is about potential and power. Just as the spatial coordinates we use to make sense of the outside have to be left behind so too do moral coordinates.

I was once talking about the darkness of the body and someone said, "oh, you mean evil." But no, I mean that darkness we carry with us always that is neither evil or good but is the space of consciousness within the body.

DP: Jung spoke about the shadow

AG: For him it's the other side of animus, the negative side of the projected personality. I don't think I read the darkness of the body in psychological terms either but in phenomenological terms. It is a place that has no dimensions.

I was very, very lucky as a child to have these powerful experiences of the space of the body because I was always sent off to go to sleep in these light-filled rooms, with a balcony. I did not need to sleep but would lie there and explore this space which was both incredibly claustrophobic and tiny but then began to expand and expand.

DP: Hmm. So what of Anish Kapoor's voids?

AG: When I saw them first I thought, "I don't need to work anymore". He's made a phenomenal demonstration of the thing I wanted everyone to intuit without wanting to show it. I was as affected as everyone else. I thought they were breathtaking - the unlimited within the limited. I felt he has materialized the thing implicit in all my work.

Since then I realized that the thing I have to offer is this reflexivity that is not about.... The problem about Anish's work and James Turrell is that it becomes the demonstration of something like a mystical experience produced by tricks of light or absence of light. I would rather the hidden remained hidden. The work makes an absolute division. It undermines the dominance of appearance, not puncturing it.

The degree to which my work is unsatisfactory as a representation is the degree to which it is asking you to look for something in yourself that can empathize with the inner space of the work which is not an object, i.e. the degree as a representation because we look... well, "the body in Western Art". We look for beauty and a certain kind of likeness. My work doesn't give likeness, or beauty in any understood way. It really presents the body as a condition, not as a given identity. It should become a catalyst.

I want the circulatory of involvement. Look at the work and ask, "what is it doing here?" "How is it in space?" "What is its dialogue with space?" "Is there an interior/exterior tension?" Then reflectively you ask yourself the same thing, "What is the relationship of my interior?"

The impossible thing I'm trying to do is accept that we live in the world of the visible, but make it unsatisfactory enough that behind the visible is some other kind of potential that does not exist in the sculpture but exists in you the viewer.

But maybe all this is a bit too airy-fairy.

DP: With some sculpture you walk around and explore. Some push you into a position in space. Your work does put me into a position.

AG: I would like it to do both. But all of the work is relatively axial. The space is confrontational, and then you circle and navigate and then come back to one-to-one, a kind of registration.

DP: Last time I visited your studio you had several pieces around the walls. It was like an energy field. The internal space creates an external space of relationship.

AG: In the past I tried to deal with this by replacing the surface structure of skin and hair etc. By a structure oriented to vertical and horizontal axes, a sort of matrix. Implied into this is the body of the planet.

DP: That response to mass, I feel it in the solar plexus. It is kinesthetic.

AG: The way in which the work affects you somatically is strongest when things are off balance or standing on the wall, i.e. levers the room out of its repose, gives the idea everything is moving and nothing is fixed.

DP: Does this also subvert the natural reaction to look for likeness?

AG: Anything that makes the viewer more conscious of his own weight, movement in space, his center of gravity while in constant motion. You are always falling when walking. That idea of human motion being precarious. I like the work to be still, silent and fixed but often tipped very close to be off its center of gravity. You think twice about taking for granted your own relationship to it. It is to encourage a reflexivity that is not about looking.

DP: A clown with big boots is very disturbing.

AG: That's a very, very good image. It's funny because it's absurd. The proportions are not as they should be. Yet in some curious way we all do those things mentally - in dreams or states of yearning. That's what made me make works like - the extended arms. It's a very, very common experience.

I remember the last time I had serious dentistry. I was on my bike and had the sensation I was rising until I was 20 ft. It was a clear sensation. I was in an extended body. I've had that feeling in other places as well. I wanted to give those natural sensations... the life of the imagination.

The sensate information from the matrix of the body is not always in sync with the.... for example, Leonardo's inscribed body is an expression of Platonic absolutes. But our experience is not like that. Inside us there is always something else being born. We have bodies that are very good, provisional habitations for the spirit. We use them and through our time in the mind and the body we are making room or creating another kind of being. Those experiences of extension from the body are signs of the potentiality of that process.

Then there's that idea of who we are and what we look like. Your physiognomy belongs to me more than to you because I'm looking. The world of appearances is a shared communication. Where we derive energy in order to take part in the shared world of appearances is from the other side of them. I want to turn things round, or make you feel maybe there is somewhere outside the outside, or there are areas of experience that are independent of the functional side of the personal. I don't know whether this darkness is really collective.

Part of me would like to believe in the Teravada Buddhist tradition - that you can transmit love as a vibration which is independent of any object. It radiates out. It is registered in that space of the darkness of the body, rather than in the other world, the world of daily life, external appearances. I think that makes me feel there is a kind of collective experience of the inner space of the body. It's dangerous to think that kind of universal... everyone has a different relationship with the internal body.

DP: Do you see that realization in the art of other cultures?

AG: It's in the wonderful Kymer heads. All of those south-east Asian Buddhist sculptures have it. You find it occasionally in Western art. Rodin's Age of Bronze has it. He had it for one moment then lost it. He pushed. He was accused of casting it from life. He had a Belgian soldier who posed for a year and a half and nearly went mad. He is looking up and is sort of holding a spear but isn't. His eyes are closed and it becomes this internal moment of realization. All the attributes have been taken away that identified it with the 19th allegorical school and it was replaced by an idea about internal space.

DP: The idea of history has gone.

AG: That is important to me. It's why the darkness of the body is important. It's completely non-conditional. People in the West are extremely frightened about this. It is only accessible through direct physical relationship and it's not put there or contextualized. It seems to many to be a denial of the whole positivistic and progressive idea about Western civilization. There has been an enormous resistance to my work because it is ahistorical.

In a way I'm accused of all things I'm not doing - i.e. looking for an ideal body. But I say look again. It's far from ideal. It's the body I am born with. Then they say, "why is it generic?" And I say, "that's a function of making a case for something". It's inside that carries the index of the particular, the outside is just the brick.

DP: Do you see other artists trying to do the same thing?

AG: In terms of painting Brice Marden does it beautifully. His idea about a surface that beams out. You are invited to register yourself against this field of color.

AG:I'm here for a while. How can I make an account for the world? Mark Rothko is at the tail end of the sublime and is very refined. He feels he's started from first principles and there is nothing to be refined about. Trying to make distance to count for something.

I'm aware of history of art but the thing is to be as direct as possible. I love Brancusi but it's the opposite, someone honing away, an abstraction that comes from purification of form which ends up being about reflected light and surfaces. I'm going the other way. If Brancusi and Cezanne used light to

supersede distance, my ambition is to deal with darkness and the distance is... I don't know if I'm interested in distance at all. I want people to feel they're inside the work.

DP: Brancusi and Cezanne draw a great deal on vision. Their work demands the eye but in your work these seems to be a great deal for a blind person.

AG: I think I'm part of a critique of the visual per se - that idea that you may use the visual sense as a basis. But it has to be verified by other forms that are to do with feeling - awareness of density. The stimulus, the way you may feel the density comes from the vision and you respond physically.

DP: I think there is also a synesthesia involved in the way I respond to your work - to the lead or the iron. I have a certain taste in my mouth when I look at lead, I can feel its malleability.

AG: Yes, and when I use iron I'm aware it is an earth material. It has a strong gravity. It has a relationship with the liquid core of the earth. I think humans do this well, this recognition. We can't get away from it. But I don't want to deny vision. It is a primary sense. But what do you use it for? For part of a wider spectrum? I'd like to feel that I'm setting up a landscape, not just to look at but to walk through and become aware of the different fields.

DP: I was listening to a talk by the film director, Ken Russel, who has recently been making radio plays. He says that vision can be shielded, that we can protect ourselves from shock, but that sound is more immediate and direct. So maybe some of these sensations you are talking about are internal and experienced in a more direct way while vision remains external and projected.

AG: Yes, I like that a lot. Sound being in some way something you are immersed in. It need not have an identifiable source. The sound of water in an underground cave, you are in that sound and the sound is in you. I'd like to feel the sculpture does that. It's being within being. It's a small and inert catalyst, a bit of matter used to catalyze your sense of being immersed in light and matter. Through the work you may become aware of the breath passing through the channels of your nose, or the weight running through your knees. Aware of the world that you inhabit and your aliveness within.

It's odd that I feel certain sculpture can do this so well, because it's the most difficult medium of all. It's so dumb, such a stumbling-block for most people. It's a bit of the material world that causes you to look at it and where it is and how it is, in a way that also causes you to look at yourself.

I don't know. I think art in many ways is being hijacked by a limited idea. You see in those societies that don't want to be literate, they transfer their shared experiences in other ways. It's perfectly natural to paint the body and not so much decorate the shared world but make it responsive to thought. In Field and in Angel of the North it's about trying, in way, to liberate art from this very, very limited world of the art gallery where things are so clinically and specifically contextualized.

DP: Satish Kumar, from Schumacher College has a story about his mother weaving a shawl for his sister. The sister found it so beautiful that she told her mother it was too beautiful to wear and she would hang it on the wall. The mother said, "when you put beautiful things on a wall, you put ugly things on your body". Kumar feels that our society is behaving the same way, the more we collect things in galleries the more ugly our daily world becomes.

AG: It's so weird. It's the trophy thing. Somehow having an animal's head on the wall or a souvenir is more important than having gone, or having seen an animal alive. Things should be quite natural.

DP: There is a similar issue with much Native American art. Iroquois grave markers are supposed to remain outside until they rot and disappear. This is a big problem for museums who want to conserve such objects.

AG: I like the idea that I'm temporarily borrowing, like I do with my body, from the planet's matter/energy and chain of being. I borrow a few bits of material that I try to shape. In the same way I try to shape my life, or my life tries to shape me. Then what happens to the art does not really matter. I really like the idea that Field belongs back in the earth. It is to be buried or to melt back into the earth. The iron is strong but it is not protected from oxidation. I'd like one to be in a tank of water that would disappear. It's a temporary record of a moment in life. It may extend the image of that life but it has to go back into the cycle of things.

DP: But there is also an element of accident involved. Some things are projected by nature, like Cave paintings. Maybe you could put it under the sea so coral grows round it.

AG: And it becomes somebody else's raw material. I like that very much.
