

ANTONY GORMLEY

MALIN HEDLIN HAYDEN - THE BODY: AN ILLUSION

From STATENSKONSTRAD CATALOGUE 36, The National Public Art Council, Stockholm, Sweden 2007

Depending on the weather, DOMAIN (Maria) appears with greater or lesser clarity where it stands on the roof of the University College of Dance in Stockholm. On misty days the slender sculpture turns grey and assumes almost the same colours as the air that surrounds it. When the sun shines, the steel rods catch the light and throw it back again as reflections. In both instances one has difficulty in perceiving the sculpture as such. That is, if sculpture refers to the material-the steel from which it is made. The sculpture allies itself visually with the weather and the state of the light. Symbolically, it refers to different moods: feeling grey, melancholy, almost dissolved, or exuberantly sunny as though the figure itself radiates a powerful light.

Throughout his work as an artist the British sculptor Antony Gormley (b. 1950) has shown a particular interest in the human body. Its physical extension in space, skin as its uttermost point-but also for the sensation of the body as a place to inhabit: where do we begin and where do we end? At our skin? Or are we as far as we can see? Gormley regards the body as a place in which we reside. He speaks of skin as "a vessel for personal space". What sort of a place is my body? This question runs like a thread through his work. But also; what is the body a place for?

During the 20th century the human figure was primarily visualized as art in public sculptures, often in the form of nude women, children at play, soldiers as part of war memorials and so on. Slightly generalizing, one can claim that modernist art was not keen to undertake images of human bodies (though both the person creating and the person beholding has and is a body). The history of art, on the other hand, is rife with bodies. When Gormley first made his mark as an artist in the early 1980s, it was his interest in representations of the human body that was seen as something new. And almost certainly as something long lost.

For several years Gormley worked exclusively with casts of his own body in materials like concrete, lead and iron. The exterior forms of the casts were either of a rather stylized and fairly anonymous human figure, or a block. A large number of "body cases" made of lead are among his best known works. They portray different poses (the body upright, lying, curled up, bending forward) and, taken in their entirety, they deal with bodily positions: how the body relates to the space in which it finds itself. And further, how the body is an instrument of experience at the same time that it is a container for these experiences. Sometimes the sculptures are placed directly on the floor, sometimes high up on a wall, or they may hang down headless from a ceiling. But Gormley has also placed some of them outdoors in an urban environment where they stand as (site) markers and force the beholder/passers-by to make a detour round them; hence acting as incitements to choreography.

The interior cavities in both the lead and the concrete sculptures have received their form from the living body from which they have been cast. The unique form is identical with its indexical referent: Gormley's own body. It is he who fits exactly into the sculpture. Hence the denomination of the sculptures as body cases. But even if the void and the artist's body have the same shape in these works they have no visual similarities. They do not look like each other. Still, one could argue that the void is a portrait of Gormley's bodily area. It is at this instance that the newness is revealed: the body as a place to inhabit. Imagine that you are a place. What sort of a place are you? And where is that place situated?

Since the 1960s there has been much talk of site-specific art - that is, art which departs from a specific place which it relates to and enters into dialogue with. In relation to Gormley's sculptures this could be understood as implying that we are all site-specific by way of our own bodies: places with different topographical elevations and depressions, and recognizable structures. But even if the body is understood as a place to inhabit, the place as such can be moved: as when we take a step.

In several projects, Antony Gormley has worked with people who reside and live their lives in the place where he has been invited to exhibit. In Allotment he advertised for models in the local paper; people of different ages and sizes, children and adults, had their bodies measured. The sculptures consist of white blocks with small holes that refer to the specific person's height and orifices for the nose, ears and sexual organs. They all look very much the same-but they extend differently in the room. There is a security in looking alike. But there is also something unpleasant - of being mistaken for someone else. In a subtle (though formally brutal) way this work deals with existential issues: with being someone specific. With an autonomous place that is exclusively one's own-the site of one's self. Here, the concrete refers to the inviolable self. But also to an "I" that could be a "you".

DOMAIN (Maria), too, has a particular body as its point of departure. This is central to Gormley's work. We can all relate to the completed works, but the work itself requires a specific body as a starting point. The dimensions are not just any dimensions but are derived from a real body, a unique place in which specific experiences are gathered. In working with this sculpture, a student at the college was chosen by lottery and acted as a mould for casting in the artist's studio. But the resulting sculpture differs profoundly from his earlier works.

About the turn of the millennium Antony Gormley began working in a more dispersed fashion. Inspired by quantum mechanics and chaos theory, he started making sculptures out of innumerable metal rods which, welded together, took the form of visual figures. The framework - or boundary - of the spatial extension of these pieces was still the human body, but instead of encapsulating the volume of the specific body (as a cavity), a large number of measuring points were used in order to structure the figure. With works like DOMAIN (Maria) one can see that this new interest coincides with the earlier, so-called, expansion pieces, of which STILL RUNNING from 1991 is but one. In this case the artist assumed a running stance, but instead of making a direct cast of the body, a larger volume was measured up; like drawing a line a foot or two beyond the limits of the body. The result was a large, swelling form that in no way visually betrays its origins.

In producing DOMAIN (Maria), Gormley worked inwards from the outside. The plaster mould was cut lengthwise into two pieces and the measuring points were placed inside the plaster mould. These points were then used for constructing the sculpture from metal rods. One half was made at a time and the two halves were then welded together. This resulted in an open, transparent structure that lets the air through (like a three-dimensional drawing). From certain directions the bodily form becomes apparent - while from others the sculpture seems like a chaotic collection of lines.

Positions are created through measurement - all the particles of which we are made up are in constant movement. To imagine our own movements

and lives as one fixed position after another would be like moving (or living one's life) in staccato. But it is by means of determining positions that it is possible to make measurements of one's place, one's bodily domain. DOMAIN (Maria) is Maria's life-size domain.
