ANTONY GORMLEY

ANTONY VIDLER - UNCANNY SCULPTURE

From ANTONY GORMLEY: BLIND LIGHT, The Hayward Gallery, The Southbank Centre, London, UK, 2007

The figuration of the human body in sculpture has always held within it something of the uncanny. From ancient Greece to the present, the sculptural figure, whether considered as magical talisman to ward off danger or propitiate the gods, or more recently as the disturbing double or imago, has been seen either as a defence against, or an uninvited guest of, unseen forces. Romantic philosophers identified the presence of the uncanny in early Greek sculpture: Schelling writing of the sculptures from the Temple of Aphiai at Aegina, saw in their attempt to configure a representation of the gods in human form, 'something extra-human or non-human - something strange,' that he qualified as a 'certain uncanny character.'[1]

It was Freud, however, who unearthed this ancient feeling of anxiety for the modern, secularised world. Writing during the terrifying years of the First World War, he was concerned to identify this feeling of slight unease, as against stronger feelings of terror, in Western literature and art; what had been a simple enough evocation of nervousness in the stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann became, in Freud's hands, a developed theory of anxiety and a grounding of the general aesthetics of the 'sublime' as espoused throughout the nineteenth century. Freud associated the uncanny with fear of castration, the death-drive or the desire to return to the womb, and found it in the terror of the evil eye, the fear of loss of sight and, above all, the double. The definition he employed was that of Schelling - the uncanny as 'something that had been repressed but which suddenly returned.' The shock of 'return' was especially associated with the double, or the doppelgänger: the sudden apparition of the ghost of the self.

Over the last two decades, the sculpture of Antony Gormley, fabricated out of casts, actual or abstracted, of the human figure, has explored many of these aspects of anxiety, placing his (or by extension, our) doubles in spatial juxtapositions and extraordinary positions that stimulate that sudden shock of realisation associated with the uncanny. From figures in space to figures making their own space, his work has gradually developed to encounter, then embrace, and finally to construct what we would call the 'architectural' in its broadest connotations. This encounter of sculpture, of the cast figure with and in space, itself produces a new kind of space: one that, rather than waiting to be occupied by human presences, as in traditional architectural space, possesses all the attributes of occupied space from the outset. Thus occupied this space is, in the deformations that stem from Gormley's figural positions, a space of uncanny dimensions: a 'double' space that disturbs precisely because it proposes an occupation before our own subject-inhabitation, and an occupation that further responds not so much to any possible occupation we might imagine, but one of ourselves distorted, positioned and transported into a world that would be, in everyday life, unimaginable.

In this exhibition Gormley activates a range of bodily-spatial intersections, some drawn from his earlier work, some entirely new, in order to pose a set of inserted spaces within the constraints of a pre-existing architectural matrix to evoke the potentiality of alternative modes of spatial and bodily occupation. Against the strict and regulated interiors of late Brutalist architecture, with its enclosed sequence of dark and artificially lit concrete-walled volumes, Gormley has constructed an 'other' architecture formed of space-filling and space-articulating sculptures, each moment in the sequence both resisting and extending traditional architectural codes.

Figural Space: DRAWN (2000/2007)
The figures, for surely they are figures with their splayed legs and outstretched arms, are pressed into the corners of the room, for surely it is a room, with its four white walls, top-lit ceiling and painted white floor. Four of the figures lie awkwardly on the floor, their arms and legs following the right angles of the corner; four others defy gravity and press themselves into the corners of the ceiling. All eight are geometrically distorted to align with the right angles of the corners. Closer inspection reveals that they are all the same figure, deployed in different ways as if to emphasise the geometrical coordinates of the room. The room is white, the figures black, and taken as a whole composition, the figures construct a space within the space of the room, pointing towards each other from their corners, sometimes with their legs, sometimes with their arms, as if intimating an organic interior to an otherwise abstract exterior.

The apparently effortless appearance of these contorted figures in the space, their clear geometries and their seeming obedience to the laws of its geometry, however, belies the radically contradictory nature of their presence. For in a number of fundamental ways, some concerned with architecture and others with sculpture, these figures contest the commonplaces of both disciplines.

Firstly, the traditional role of architectural space is to house the human body; its dimensions, its scale, its relationship to the vertical and horizontal, its enclosing surfaces, are all calculated to enclose, shelter and comfortably accommodate the figure, whether upright and still or in movement. The grid of top lighting in the space under consideration affirms this role, attesting to the difference between surfaces used as floors, walls and ceilings. When architects design spaces, they trace their outlines in three dimensions with these distinctions firmly in mind; they attribute roles to their surfaces according to imagined bodies, upright, standing, walking or running, circulating through and utilising their spaces, in a virtual enactment of future occupation. Architectural space is, in this sense, constituted, stabilised and given authority by reference to such bodies.

Here, however, the bodies are suddenly displaced from their proper spatial role, into a space that no architect (unless designing according to gravity-free rules) could imagine. The position of the eight figures indeed challenges all regular coordinates of verticality and horizontality, constituting an alternative space within the regular architectural space, one that turns incessantly in every dimension, thus placing our own observing and participating bodies (subject to the normal rules of architectural space) in precarious suspension.

Secondly, these figures are placed in conscious opposition to the normal rules of architectural perception. These rules guarantee that surfaces are recognised as walls, floors and ceilings in relation to their vertical and horizontal intersections - the lines, so to speak, that are delineated by planes coming together at right angles. But these figures accentuate a little-observed aspect of spatial geometry - the interior corners. They act as markers of the points from which this geometry is projected, the origins of the lines articulating the intersection of surfaces. As such, they are markers of normally unseen and unnoticed spatial origins - much as if they were the residue of the architect's drawing techniques, the little crosses that allowed for the setting-up of the projection in the first place. And while outside corners - like the much discussed corners of Mies van der Rohe's IIT buildings, with their careful representation of intersecting steel members - are often inspected in architecture as evidence of the architect's mastery of formal and technical demands, inside corners are generally overlooked, more the difficult repositories of dust and the uninhabitable realms of the space than any contribution to its architectonic value. And it is this very uninhabitability of the inside corner that the inserted figures challenge, as if they had quite

comfortably taken up residence in a space normally forbidden to the body.

Thirdly, these figures are to all intents and purposes bodies, or rather those surrogates for bodies generally called sculptures. Here it is that a second set of conventions is defied. For the classical Western figure sculpture, like the classical Western body, is upright, and defines a space for itself much like the body it represents, an all-round space implying possible movement and calling for the rotating movement of the spectator. It was Adolf Hildebrand in the late nineteenth century who first considered the demands that sculpture places on space and, hence, on the observer. Distinguishing between the spatial implications of bas-reliefs (frontal vision) and freestanding sculptures (all-round vision) he set out the grounds for a modern spatial psychology, one that would take hold in all the arts after 1900. These figures, however, are pressed into service to the space: they conform to its geometrical demands rather than posing their own, and they certainly cannot be seen in the round. They, then, are certainly not sculptures in the classical sense, despite their apparent realism. In this context our figures demand an impossible space both from the viewer and for themselves as sculptures: fully in the round yet pressed into the wall as bas-reliefs, they allow of no circular motion around them, constrained as they are to the geometrical limits of the space they both articulate and are bonded to.

But of course, we know that these figures are in fact not sculptures, modelled or carved in the traditional sense, but figures resulting from casts of actual bodies, in this instance of the sculptor himself, and thus positive replicas of the negative hollow space left by a body that once occupied a plaster cocoon. And where casting might be a recognised sculptural technique, it is generally a process that reproduces a solid model, and not a living, breathing body the absence of which creates a void filled by the molten metal.

Here a solid reproduces a void, much in the same way that, say, Rachel Whiteread's House (1993) cast the negative imprint of a space in solid impermeable form. Perhaps these figures are, so to speak, the expelled inhabitants of such a house, inhabitants of a world in reverse. Architects in the modern period have often imagined 'space' as a positive entity to be sculpted and moulded as if in clay or plaster - Pier Luigi Moretti even cast models of classic buildings demonstrating the properties of space in a three-dimensional figure-ground reversal. Gormley's figures are somewhat of the same genre, with the exception that they are deployed in real space, articulating in this way a strange dialectic between inside-out and outside-in.

The great puzzle for the German art historian J. J. Winckelmann was how to get inside a sculpture. Obsessively he would circle the body, calibrating its convexities and concavities, sometimes heightening the effect of the shadows by using candlelight, always asking the mute stone for an answer to the interior meaning, the 'ideal' of human figuration exemplified by the outer surface. How else, he reasoned, could the Greek sculptor have achieved such perfection in the imitation of the figure, if he had not held in his mind some ideal model, which, imprisoned within the block, might be revealed by his work? Later critics drew the comparison between the sculpture and the equally mysterious mummies being disinterred in Egypt. One might imagine that the ideal inner body was hidden within layers of cloth and wax, as if one could peel the sculpture like an onion to reveal its hidden perfection. Gormley, by casting his own body, has in a way duplicated and articulated this analytic perception, but now again in reverse mode; the ideal starting-point of the sculpture is real, and its cast intimates an ideal that is ever embedded in the living model.

Infinite Space: ANOTHER PLACE (1997) / EVENT HORIZON (2007)
The figures, their backs turned to us, are spaced in irregular lines across the field of view, their feet in the water, their multiplied dark forms stretching towards the horizon. Neither bathers nor a holiday crowd by the beach, they seem more like observers, keeping watch for the appearance of something that we might miss through inattention or lack of time. They are timeless and will evidently watch for us through eternity, their shadows seamed on the folded surface of the water by the setting and rising sun. We have the impression that even if nothing should appear, they would still be standing, like primitive dolmens, those standing stones that Hegel saw as the origin of architecture, the first columns, symbolic of the figure later to be sculpted in the classical age.

The self-conscious placement of figures in the landscape - whether as actors playing the part of a 'hermit' or 'monk' or as pictorial conventions in painting - was a favourite pastime in the late eighteenth century. As the critic John Barrell has reminded us, such figures, placed for aesthetic or historical effect, were in some way stand-ins for the figures that actually populated the working landscape - beggars, peasants, labourers - that would spoil the real view from the great house. Even as ha-has were invented to allow the expanded view of the landowners' territory, uninterrupted by inconvenient hedges and fences, so the figures in the landscape needed aesthetic control, scotomisation and re-engineering. There were some figures, however, that were less the fashion accessories of aristocratic picnics and more the projections of the individual's imagined self. Thus the mysterious observers depicted in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings of landscape vertigo with their backs turned to the viewer, in shadow, as if inviting the viewer to enter into their bodies and share the objects of their gaze.

In ANOTHER PLACE, the deployment of Gormley's figures across the horizon of the viewer's gaze, however, also produces the effect of a panorama, one that reminds us of the early nineteenth-century panoramas with their intimations of 360-degree vision. In particular, we might see the image of Friedrich's painterly panorama of the solitary figure on the beach, his Monk by the Sea (Mönch am Meer, 1809). This figure is also turned with his back to us, almost a black shadow against the horizon of grey sea and turbulent clouds, inviting us, as with many of Friedrich's figures, to step into the picture and substitute ourselves for the shadowy presences that looked out at their infinite landscapes. In Gormley's picture, however, the isolated figure of the meditative Romantic subject is replicated in many figures; the individual replaced by the multitude, but a multitude composed of single individuals, each one with its own position in the picture, and a ready substitute for our own modern subject-hood.

Heinrich von Kleist observed of Friedrich's painting that one looked at its intimidating vastness as if one's eyelids had been stripped bare, marking the sublime terror of nature's infinity by the equally terrifying isolation of the individual subject. Now, with the sublime divested somewhat of its originating awe, we have company as we contemplate the universe; but yet a company still returning to its monadic origins, self-enclosed in the endless replication of single selves.

For this Hayward exhibition, Gormley has reversed the vision of his watchers. In EVENT HORIZON the standing figures, mounted on the tops of surrounding buildings, look towards the gallery to form a perimeter of viewers, viewing the site of the exhibition. As a panorama, enclosing a broad urban circle around The Hayward, these figures at once silently guard and monitor the collective community of figures assembled within the gallery. Whereas in ANOTHER PLACE, we are, so to speak, outside the circle of the panorama, looking in and uncertain of the object of the figures' vision, now we are at the centre, the very object of the watchers' attention.

It was common in Roman building, and in its revival in the Renaissance, to stand figures of the gods and heroes on the balustrades of public buildings and private palaces. Looking out to the city or the countryside, these statues not only variegated the profile of the building, linking it to the urban or rural landscape, but also in a sense protected the owner from harm, acting as sentinels and stand-ins in the same way as their modern equivalent, the surveillance camera, provides an artificial eye in the absence of the inhabitant. In EVENT HORIZON Gormley has established the inverse of this

outward looking presence, substituting a multiplicity of guardians overlooking and verifying the contents of the gallery. By implication this establishes the exhibition in a double circle, the first within the walls of The Hayward, the second deeply embedded in the city itself. If this were a Greek foundation, The Hayward would be the treasury and the ring of watchers the guardians of the 'polis'. In the modern condition, however, the appearance of these sombre figures, silhouetted against the sky, taking charge of rooftop after rooftop like so many alien bodies precipitated from outer space, gives pause to any sense of security. If the watchers are tied to their compatriots in the gallery, they are also occupying the city and controlling the space of the viewer - if not abrogating that space to themselves. Where are we in this equation, if not subjected to a gaze we cannot reciprocate, and that refuses to see us? In Lacan's words, 'The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture.'[2]

Solid Space: FIELD FOR THE BRITISH ISLES (1993) / ALLOTMENT II (1996) / SPACE STATION (2007)
In FIELD, the seemingly innumerable multitude of figures are pressed together in a mass - no one the same, yet all similar. Crude clay versions of the human with roughly moulded bodies, vestigial heads, and no limbs; but their eyes, deeply pierced, look mutely ahead towards us, seemingly inquisitive, perhaps appealing, calling for something from us, or even demanding, if not threatening. Their mass is certainly threatening, as it pours like some terrifying and endlessly enlarging blob through the spaces of the gallery. Indeed, the river of figures fills the space completely, pushing against walls that can hardly contain it. Fired in clay, this mass has the air of a burial pit, the figures created to accompany some ancient ruler to the nether world. Yet the animation of the figures, some with head cocked to one side, others sunk in thought, still others looking steadfastly ahead, all gestures apparently intimated with a simple pressure of the fingers in the clay, gives us the sense that the mass is still very much alive.

We know the story of their making: a collective work, thousands made in a week by a whole village or community, the community replicating itself several times over and gathering itself together in miniature. This is then a collectively fabricated mass, a multitude with an origin. Assembled en masse in the gallery, this collective has the force to create its own space; if the traditional gallery is a void for the display of single works, then this is a gallery transformed into the negative space of a solid mass. Le Corbusier spoke of the fundamental elements of architecture as 'Volume, Mass, and Surface', and invented an abstract language where volumes became masses on the outside, articulated by their surfaces inside and out. Here the mass, constituting itself as an architectural force, has invaded the volume and, pressing up against its surfaces, challenges its solidity. Figures, the stand-ins for individuals, arrayed as a collective, have become architecture in and for themselves.

There are other figures of architecture in Gormley's work. In ALLOTMENT II these are figures literally constructed out of the dimensions of individual subjects, proportionally and geometrically formed as standing monoliths with cubes for heads and holes for ears, mouths and sexual organs. With no eyes to see but only orifices to hear, taste and feel, these figures inhabit their rooms, silently communing in space. Lacan spoke of the painful origins of architecture in the figure of Daphne transformed into a tree; here the body is rendered sightless and mute by its reduction, or rather return, to geometry. Like the monument erected in his Weimar garden by Goethe, that cube surmounted by a sphere said to be characterised by J. G. Herder as 'stone with a head on it,' they at once figure the origins of architecture and sculpture.

In The Hayward, Gormley inserts two versions of these space-filling mechanisms, SPACE STATION (2007) and HATCH (2007). SPACE STATION, with the double implication of the name indicating its origins from space as well as its operation as a station-point in space, seems to grow from a single unit, as if a three-dimensional pixel had accumulated in order to fill a prescribed volume, with the sense that even this volume would be soon uncontainable within the restraining walls of the gallery. Like some uncontrollable phantom from an early horror film, now articulated as a precise structure of DNA elements, SPACE STATION hovers in the first gallery of the exhibition, a warning that the space of Gormley's installation, however articulated by figures of a more or less humanoid form, and despite our knowledge that they are for the most part cast from Gormley himself, will not be entirely for our own occupation and enjoyment. HATCH, by contrast, takes up the regular coordinates of a spatial grid - the virtual grid that inhabits every geometrically defined volume - and makes them tangible in a forest of material lines. Whether or not the resulting space is actually inhabitable by a viewer, the struts and beams of this grid are clear indications that, to paraphrase Lacan, 'The space, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the space.'

Original Space
In each of these cases, the figures in the corners of interior space and the figures standing in exterior space, space itself has been reinvented by the self-conscious transformation of the body as a surrogate for the figure that, in the first place, constituted space itself. Here we might hazard the proposition that Gormley has, so to speak, retraced the origins of architectural space and in the process reinvented it for a present that has not yet fully appropriated, much less exhausted, the potentialities of that idea of abstract space we have called 'modern' since the end of the nineteenth century.

For the idea of architectural space was an essentially modern idea that emerged with force at the turn of the twentieth century, invested with all the power of a new psychology of the subject's relation to the object. Where the space of a Descartes or a Kant was stable, universal and mathematical in its certainty of position and placement, the space of the late nineteenth century was an uncertain realm of projection and introjection, relative at every moment to the psychic life of the subject; it was a space created by and for the subject, whether moving in dance or poised in momentary stillness. The Spielraum or space of play envisaged by Heinrich Wölfflin, was even given a history, as Alois Riegl traced the effects in art of the emergence of Roman distant vision from the haptic, close-up vision of the Egyptians and the middle-vision of the Greeks, each stage of development forcing a new viewpoint of the observer and thus a new form of appearance for the object.

In the context of our discussion, it is not incidental that this new idea of space was a direct product of the sculptural imagination. From Winckelmann's careful tracing of the contours and surfaces of classical sculpture in the mid-eighteenth century, to Adolf Hildebrand's analysis of the relation between vision, space and sculptural object at the end of the nineteenth, an idea of the space formed by and for sculpture developed that was to dominate spatial theory for the first half of the twentieth century. The sculpture, so to speak, stood in for the viewing subject as a surrogate, demonstrating the principles of spatial experience - Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's sculpture of sensations now animated by psychological forces.

From this new sense of space emerged a new history of architecture that authorised the attempt to constitute a new architecture. Out of the anthropomorphic tradition established by Vitruvius and confirmed by the Renaissance, a tradition given historicist dimensions by Hegel, was developed an idea of transcendent abstraction, one that overcame the particularism and nostalgia of the historical styles, in order to posit a universal language of form in itself. Critics have accused this vision of having abandoned the human, together with the figural symbolism that once gave architecture meaning. Yet whether Expressionist in its literal depiction of subjective movement or Purist in its abstract intimations of psychic states, this architecture relied on the fundamental premise of a new subject. What has been interpreted as vulgar functionalism was in reality the sculpting of space around the hypothetical subject, but now with all its bodily attributes supplemented by recognition of its mental states.

With uncanny precision Gormley's figures re-enact these absent bodies, but in a way that goes beyond the simple re-introduction of the anthropomorphic into modern abstraction. Figures that are bodies, bodies that are casts of bodies, bodies that reformulate the spatial dimensions of inside and outside, are figures that make architecture in and by themselves, throwing our own subjective visions of interiors and landscapes into doubt, but also projecting them into new potentialities. Inhabiting Gormley's figures as subjects, we are, one by one and together, constructed as architects of our own spaces and thus invested with the analytical and constructive power both to think as well as to create space. That this space resists and is critical of the world as it is while proposing a possible world that is inclusive of, and reciprocally responsible to society and nature is perhaps the most we can hope for from sculpture today.

Blur Space: BLIND LIGHT (2007)
Each time the word unheimlich appears in Freud's text - and not only in the essay of this title, Das Unheimlich - one can localise an uncontrollable undecidability in the axiomatics, the epistemology, the logic, the order of the discourse and of the thetic or theoretic statements[3].

Gormley goes one step further to contest the very limits of spatial definition in such a way as to dissolve the uncanny effects of sculptural installation and to transfer those effects to the nature of space itself. In BLIND LIGHT , he constructs space as a sculpture, making its form, normally virtual and only sensed through the forms of its enclosure and occupation, tangible and tactile through the operation of light on moisture that is both space and space-filling. Here he reprises, with significant modifications, experiments in ambiguous space by architects over the last decade, first in the play of translucencies and opacities initiated by Rem Koolhaas in his competition project for the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris of 1989 and, more recently, extended by the architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro in their installation for Expo 2002 in Switzerland.

In the summer of 2002 in the lake at Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland, the architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro installed a building constructed out of a steel frame equipped with thousands of small nozzles that projected droplets of purified water into the air. The result was, in the architects' words, a 'blur', or 'cloud' that hovered above the surface of the lake. Its form was ovoid in still weather, and elongated and distributed across water and land in windy weather. It was approached by narrow steel bridges across which visitors passed, dressed in plastic raincoats. Entering the 'cloud', visitors gradually lost all sense of open space, and were absorbed into the atmosphere of a palpable but opaque, translucent space. Bodies disappeared and reappeared; lights shone momentarily, then were blotted out; the stairs to the upper level were now seen, now obscured. In this moist cloud, all confidence in the clarity of an architectural space was lost together with that of the visiting subject's body. All was absorbed into light and mist.

The building fundamentally destabilised the common version of architectural space as an open spielraum, a humanist playroom, or a functional layout, and rendered space as a positive rather than a negative force. The body, commonly reinforced by architectural space, was progressively lost and itself became a blur. 'Lost in space' became a reality, and the sense of disorientation accompanying a visit to the Blur Building was, for most visitors, a (slightly) terrifying experience. The emergence and disappearance of others in the mist, like the double glimpsed and then lost in a mirror, was disturbing, if not uncanny.

Five years later, Antony Gormley has taken this experience inside, enclosing it in a translucent cubic volume in The Hayward. But where the Diller Scofidio + Renfro installation was in the open air, subject to all the vicissitudes of wind, temperature and atmospheric pressure, now the experiment is controlled - with temperature and density held at a precise level and the resulting viscosity of the space-filling moisture - the captured cloud - constant. Bodies enter the enclosure, and are progressively lost to view, even as each body loses its sense of sight; the haptic sense replaces the optic sense, as if reversing centuries of visual evolution, and body and mind lose their way in a deliberately disorientating, coolly refrigerated and mistily obscure space. The coolness, the loss of vision and the impossibility of orientation all reinforce the artificial nature of the experiment. But unlike the Skinner Boxes of the 1950s, those black boxes for psychological experimentation, Gormley's installation plays with psychological themes without instrumental programme; rather the sensation of losing spatial coordination is experienced as a positive and enriching state - one that liberates the body from its normal conditions of responding to verticality, horizontality and clear boundaries. Sculpture and architecture here absorb each other with reciprocal cannibalism, to produce a space that is, in itself and for itself, truly autonomous; an autonomy that allows the body to assume an alternative state, half concrete, half virtual, and suspended between the two. Such a suspension, somewhere between the traditional 'utopia' of no place and the Modernist 'utopia' of 'good place', might conceivably provide the conditions for a re-thinking of both: an experience of 'neither/nor' in a way that, through its very ambiguity, opens a space for an uncanny that is no longer an anxiety, but a form of individual and social projection beyond the confines of the real. Here, the elusive figures in the cloud join with the watchers on the horizon as a virtual model of a possible urban contract: between those we know we are, and those we know we are not; between others and ourselves.

Notes
1. Schelling, F. W. J. von., Philosophie der Mythologie (1842) Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1996,
vol. 2, p. 654.
2. Lacan, J., The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Miller, J. A. (ed.), translated by Sheridan, A., W. W. Norton, New York, 1978, p. 96.
3. Derrida, J., Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,translated by Prenowitz, E., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 46.

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