ANTONY GORMLEY

SUSAN STEWART - THE SCULPTOR AS FIRST FINDER

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

I
Undis, ignibus, aere
Pictum, gemmeum, & aureum
O sum, (scilicet, O nihil.)
Richard Crashaw (1612/13-49), 'Bulla[1]'

Abstraction is an inevitable aspect of perception - not only in peripheral and nocturnal vision, for example, but also to the extent that it is an outcome of any view of a certain proximity or distance. Yet abstraction is not a consequence of perception alone; to the contrary, our capacity for abstraction is what makes it possible to remove (ab-strare) ourselves from sense-bound context and locate ourselves in relation to the supersensible. In painting, the advent of Modernist abstraction freed artists from the necessity of representing two-dimensional space as three-dimensional, as it also made possible the actual transformation of two-dimensional space into three dimensions: painting became both colour field and relief sculpture in the age of abstraction and that age necessarily carried with it a discourse on sublimity.

But sculpture in the age of abstraction never lost its phenomenal foundation and, to the extent that abstract painting became sculpture, sculptural values continued to pull all abstract art forms back, or forwards, into the realm of the senses and the density of matter. Sculpture inevitably suggests concepts of appearance, presence and beholding. Regardless of the changes Modernism brought to the practice of sculpture, interiority, surface, domain and, most profoundly perhaps, death and animation remain crucial features of sculpture's three-dimensional legacy.

As sculpture continues to mediate the relationship between our physical being, the built environment that shelters us, and the environment of nature, it necessarily has worked between the scale of the hand and the monument. Human form remains the measure of all things, but issues of abstraction bearing on the human figure become particularly problematic since our terms for abstracted persons - the collective, the community, the crowd - all depend upon various individual identifications. At its most positive pole, the 'human abstract', as William Blake called it, is a matter of consent and collective, reciprocal, recognitions[2]; at its most negative, it is a matter of complicity and herd-like blind motion.

I begin this essay on the work of Antony Gormley with these comments regarding abstraction and identification because Gormley's artistic practice is a concerted study of these fundamental problems in sculpture, as it is also a path-breaking exploration of the relationships between makers and made things. In this regard, Gormley's contribution to the subject-object problem in art is analogous to the contribution the phenomenologists have made to that problem in philosophy more generally - Gormley begins from deep within the experience of life and moves outwards to encompass more and more of the given world; there is no alienation between perceiver and object or, more accurately, artist and nature. Even on the scale of his perhaps most famous works - the monumentally singular ANGEL OF THE NORTH (1998) and the monumentally multiple and handmade FIELD FOR THE BRITISH ISLES (1993) - there is no need for a discourse on sublimity, since the sense-bound world of matter remains the object of the sculptor's literal métier, his loom.

The mythical sculptor Daedalus is described in later Greek and Roman literature as a protos heuretes or 'first finder', for, as Diodorus of Sicily (1st century BC) writes in his Library of History, Daedalus was the first to show the living, open-eyed, quality of human beings in motion and extension. In Plato's Socratic dialogue Meno (c.402 BC), too, the living statues of Daedalus are described as being so remarkably lifelike that they are said to 'play truant and run away' if they are not tied down. Yet Daedalus also made the wax wings that were the ruin of his own son, Icarus[3]. Gormley is another protos heuretes as he sets out where Daedalus' myth of transcendence goes wrong. Gormley's work continually reminds us of our necessary submission to fundamental forces of gravity and magnetism, and of our elemental relations with sunlight, the tide and those molecular forms that we share with the most primitive versions of life and matter, such as yeast and crystals. His sculptures are earth-bound and heavy; their closed eyes sense the immediacy of the onslaught of sensory phenomena, the too-blinding light of that idealism the sun proposes. They are not representations of life, but rather part of life, drawn from within matter and emergent. To behold them is not to think of a person as a thing or a thing as a person; we, the observers, become the moving open-eyed forms who mediate between these figures cast from inward-looking bodies. We are able to follow a human intention carried out to particular ends and to view the continuity between artistic process and life processes. Casting, moulding, firing, framing, lowering and rising - the tasks of sculpture are linked to the thickening of hides and shedding of skins, the fossilising and unfreezing of motion in time, processes of birth and incarnation marvellous by virtue of being perfectly ordinary.

II
We are made wonderfully great, our bones have been numbered and ordered with care, our nerves woven together, and our veins made into torrents of life. We are made from clay, poured out like milk and curdled like cheese; we are clothed with skin and the breath of God gives us life.
Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Plastik [Sculpture]
(based on Psalms 139:14, Job 10:9-11, Job 33:4-6 and Genesis 2:7)

Deep below the gallery spaces of The Hayward lies the 'plant room' where the institution's heating, air conditioning, plumbing and electrical systems are rooted. Each gallery is served by great aluminium ducts that continually extract, temper, filter and supply air. Like enormous Möbius strips, these channels seem to be all surface, yet they pulse and rumble with the motion of the air they contain. Meanwhile, the electrical system hums, the plumbing knocks and whooshes, and gridded fans squeak like a congregation of wrens.

A building - like a city or a universe - can have a heart and lungs, a centre and skin. And, as Gormley's 1996-97 work SIEVE indicates, our own heart, lungs and other organs can be seen as living machines - sieving, pumping, hammering, funnelling, taking on the work that is necessary for life. Once we begin to imagine those processes that move us and those processes we set in motion as continuous, the metaphysic of interiority and exteriority begins to dissolve, and creation is no longer a matter of animating what was lifeless. Expansion and contraction are the primordial motions of the universe and each Gormley sculpture or installation is a material meditation on the repetition of this breathing motion[4].

At the same time, every Gormley work begins, and continues to find its centre within, the human body - frequently the habitat of his own body, for many of his works take their point of departure from plaster of Paris casts of himself that he creates, with help from others, through an exacting and physically demanding process. These casts are used as the core of works in lead, steel, aluminium and iron, with one hide replacing another. The word 'habitat' and its corollary 'habitation' come from the Latin verb for 'having and holding' and Gormley, like a caterpillar with a spinneret, is able to hold or encase himself or others at the premise of his work: each layer is held within another environment and awaits its expansion as internal phenomena are continually externalised. The lime used in the plaster that preserves these living forms is the same lime that breaks down organic matter. Our disappearing lanugo; our expanding, growing carapace; our confining sarcophagus: a womb, a bomb, a tomb - these frames are analogues in Gormley's sculptural thinking. In this art, energy is cyclically contained, released and recontained; birth and death are paired, just as motion is potential in stillness and rest in motion.

Whether architectural or figurative, made by various collectives or by the artist working with a few helpers, Gormley's works always begin in an act of inward-looking will and end in the standpoint of a viewer who is viewed while viewing. The moment of viewing as punctum temporis has been explored, of course - in texts from Leon Battista Alberti's Della Pittura (1435) to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry (1766) - and indeed has become something of a cliché in Modernist and contemporary art. Yet Gormley's sculptures, in their installed settings, emphasise that there must be a partial disassociation or distance between viewpoints or, in a kind of perceptual lock-down, there will be no means to witness any event or transformation. To hold a point of view is necessarily then to see the connection and diremption between that point and others. In this regard, Gormley's work returns us to a more basic perceptual issue explored in Aristotle's discussion of a point [stigma] in De Anima (c.350 BC)[5]. Meditating on the irreducibility of the soul, Aristotle observes that a point, irreducible in itself, is nevertheless always a boundary; every singularity is also a dividing line. Similarly, while the stigma marks a site of terminus, it also is the centre of a set of radii. Is the stigmata of a saint, for example, the end of a motion or the beginning of one? The concentration of an array, or the initiation of radiance? A centre may seem to be singular, but each centre is also potentially infinite[6].

A number of natural phenomena serve as models and guides for the geometry of Gormley's own points, sequences and surfaces. Among them, the living cell membrane, strengthened by its spherical shape and the fluid motion of its response to the watery bath that surrounds it; the spherical shapes of bubbles, which adjust to each other at points of attachment and undergo a process of cavitation or bursting, depending on the stress produced by those surfaces they encounter; and, finally, the patterns of rhizomes, whose terminal nodes are always a point of origin for another line. Cells and bubbles are evoked by the matrices welded on and out of the surfaces of the figures, rhizomes by trajectories of negative space. These are established as the viewer draws sight lines or haptic agendas around and through large-scale works such as ALLOTMENT II (1996), presented in this exhibition. Rhizomic structures are also evoked by the appearance and reappearance of the water-bound and water-borne figures of ANOTHER PLACE (1997) along the sea at Cuxhaven, Germany; Stavanger, Norway; De Panne, Belgium; and Crosby Beach near Liverpool. As these figures travel horizontally from place to place, they are submerged and revealed by the vertical action of the tides.

Our baptism begins with the fluid bath of the cell; we are made from water, though, at least in Britain, our weight is measured in 'stones'. The antinomy of stone and water, central to all sculptural making and erosion, is a recurring dynamic in these sculptures; like stones cast in water, they ring outwards to the next point or node. Analogously, Gormley's global work orbits out to include more and more far-flung communities, from Scandinavia to the Australian desert. At the same time, this work seems rooted in the industrial grids and transportation lines, the ring roads, and that most fundamental of rhizomes, the Underground, that characterise the metropolis of London - all the humming circuits of the capital city.

Certain of Gormley's sculptures confront us with concentrated forms of density and potential, as in his SEEDS III/V (1989/1993), his CAPACITOR (2001), and the whirling concentric spheres of his FEELING MATERIAL pieces (2003-7). Others are expanded radii with absent, yet discernible, centres, as in his QUANTUM CLOUD pieces of the late 1990s and in SPACE STATION (2007). If Gormley often counters the urge to expansion with a retrospective, and conscientious, movement of concentration, SPACE STATION exemplifies how an urge to expansion counters the stasis of too much concentration. Here he and his team of assistants began with versions that involved filling the container of the figure with blocks until reaching a point of saturation. They then turned to opening up the space between such blocks. The final work is haunted by the position of the initial, foetus-like or fallen figure, bearing its 'cast' as we might bear the shadow of a feeling inside ourselves without necessarily manifesting it; indeed the shape is carried like a seed while the scale of the overall work has grown up to 100 times the initial human figure. The final accretion of this piece is the Cor-Ten rust that first erodes the work and then becomes a surface that protects it.

Gormley creates a cosmology that begins with the rhythm of his own pulse and hands, and moves to the edges of his body, to the edges of his clothing, to the edges of his encounters with others, to the edges of his dwelling places, to the edges of the built environment, to the edges of such geographical spaces as the shoreline and desert. Our perception of existence is founded upon such encounters with edges. Our bodies are bodies by virtue of the fact that they resist - they resist the will and the imagination and they resist the pressing matter of the world. They are impressed, as Gormley emphasises in SENSE (1991). And, as he emphasises in FLOOR (1981), they leave impressions. In HATCH (2007) the perspective is detached from containment entirely. The edge is a place of potential penetration and gives the viewer a sense of what it is like to be inside a mould. To travel through the space horizontally the viewer pours himself into it; this is an active reversal of such passive experiences as, say, going down a slide. Gormley's BLIND LIGHT (2007) and BREATHING ROOM I (2006) [see p. 54] present totalised light environments that create a sense of disorientation and vertigo in the viewer. Kant had written in his 1786 essay 'What is Orientation in Thinking?': 'To orientate oneself, in the proper sense of the word, means to use a given direction - and we divide the horizon into four of these - in order to find the others, and in particular that of sunrise.' Nevertheless, he goes on to explain that our capacity to orientate ourselves geographically proceeds by means of a completely subjective distinction, by a feeling of right and left. Such feeling finds its origin in an environmental correlate, but we forget that basis. As we negotiate movement by means of sound and haptic memory in BLIND LIGHT or are returned to solar coordinates in BREATHING ROOM I, we experience a sense of loss of edge, yet are thrown back into the edge of our own proprioception[7].

Are the figures of DRAWN (2000/2007) left at the corners of the gallery room by the expansion of an explosion, or have they been pulled out through the edges by threads that we can no longer see? Does an equivalent, cantilevering weight hold them in place? Are the figures dangling to the floor in CRITICAL MASS II (1995) dropped like executed prisoners from a dock or are they rescued, held up and back, from some deeper abyss? Fast-thinking, good reflexes, careful approaches, well-meaning impulses - all are aspects of our physical being that save us, and these sculptures remind us of what such states of heightened alertness require. The array of Gormley's figures ambiguously suggests worshippers entering the sea, ancient figures fleeing fire and cast forever in its ashes, postures of banishment and welcome, self-containment, enclosure and embracing. Some figures swarm and spark; others seem the very embodiment of patience and stillness. We recognise the casts of Gormley's own body, yet we also come to know the precise dimensions of myriad other persons through the measured forms of ALLOTMENT II and DOMAIN FIELD (2003). We see others metonymically through the ghostly fog of BLIND LIGHT and then encounter them again as presences in the open spaces of the exhibition.

We are vertical beings on the horizontal surface of the earth with a sense of haptic purpose. Though distance is necessary for any experience of seeing, distance is also something we tend to think of as in need of closure. Moving inside The Hayward spaces, we can see the sculptures only from certain points of view and it gradually becomes apparent that the exhibition is constructed as a series of concentric rings. The inner limit is the absent central gestalt of SPACE STATION or the feeling of lost coordinates within BLIND LIGHT - views from which we can begin to build inside a building. The outer limit is EVENT HORIZON (2007). These vast figural nudes, around 30 casts placed along public walkways at eye level or high on the rooftops around the Southbank Centre, subtly draw the attention; they, too, suggest viewers being viewed, as they also suggest the horizon as a limit to intelligibility.

In his classic treatise Truth and Method, the phenomenologist Hans-Georg Gadamer described the horizon as 'something into which we move and which moves with us' - indicating that a horizon is a limit of perception, a kind of perceptual blind spot, and yet a place where views might be fused or put into communication[8]. Gormley's figures, there on the edge of our seeing, intensify our sense that cities are places where we are observed and observe others. Yet because of their remote and high situations, they also suggest at once the lonely anomie of suicides and the engaged solicitude of guardian spirits. They are like magnets in search of a field: they will make us stop in mid-step in order to animate them with narratives to which they may or may not conform. At the centre of Gormley's SPACE STATION and by means of these antennae-like solitaries, the 'alien' turns out to be potentially familiar: these are figures who have re-entered our world and bear the scorch and wind marks to prove it.

Where is the frontier today? It is not, as Daedalus imagined, in transcendence, but rather in a recognition of the finitude of our lives on a finite earth. To a logic of scarcity and escape, Antony Gormley counterposes an ethic of concentration and expansion, one where freedom is a relation of dependency, and descent into matter, true gravitas, figures the progress of human form.

Notes

1. Water, fire and air / Painted, bejeweled, and golden / O I am (that is, O nothing)', Crashaw, R., 'Bulla' [Bubble], translated by Reid, D., in The John Donne Journal, North Carolina State University, 2005, vol. 24, pp. 297-302.
2. Blake, W., 'The Human Abstract' (1794) from Songs of Experience in Erdman, D. V. (ed.), The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, Doubleday, New York, 1965, p. 27. Of particular relevance is Blake's notion of how 'the Catterpiller and Fly, / Feed on the Mystery' and the last stanza: 'The Gods of the earth and sea, Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree, But their search was all in vain: There grows one in the Human Brain.'
3. Herder, G., Plastik [Sculpture], Gaiger, J. ,(ed. and trans.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002 (first published 1778). The epigraph to part II of this essay comes from p. 76. For a discussion of Daedalus as 'first finder', see Gaiger's editorial note on pp. 123-24, n. 13. For the skittishness of Daedalus' statues, see Meno in The Works of Plato, Jowett, B., (ed. and trans.), 4 vols, Tudor, New York, n.d., III, pp. 51-52.
4. Gormley's experiences in the 1970s of studying the Buddhist meditative breathing technique anapana or 'mindfulness of breathing' with the Vipassana teacher Goenka, S.N., have been a key influence on the forms and effects of his art.
5. Aristotle, De Anima 3.2.427a9-14, in McKeon, R. (ed.), The Basic Works of Aristotle, Random House, New York, 1941, pp. 535-606; discussion of the point is on pp. 585-86.
6. My comments here are indebted to the extensive and insightful discussion of Aristotle's thinking in De Anima on the undivided and singular and its relation to the soul, as well as its legacy in the work of Alexander of Aphrodisias, in Daniel Heller-Roazen's The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation, Zone Books, New York, 2007, pp. 32-34. Aristotle draws forward the idea that every point, in that it is both itself and at the same time an end and a beginning, is both singular and double. But it is Alexander who develops the idea of not simply a limit point, but countless lines extending towards a circumference that resembles, in its fixity, its initiating centre.
7. Kant, I., 'What is Orientation in Thinking?' in Reiss, H. (ed.), Kant: Political Writings, translated by Nisbet, H. B., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 237-49 and pp. 238-39.
8. Gadamer, H-G., Truth and Method, translated by Weinsheimer, J. and Marshall, D. G., Continuum Books, London and New York, 2004 (first published 1960).

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