

# ANTONY GORMLEY

## *ECKHARD SCHNEIDER - IN AND OUT*

From ANTONY GORMLEY, Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria, 2009.

Antony Gormley's radical actuality as an artist derives from his boldness in reconciling two seemingly irreconcilable factors. The first, a fundamental interest in the human body, formed the starting point of his work. Gormley opened up this classic subject of art, which had virtually been worked to death, to entirely new artistic and social realms by addressing it in terms of the second factor: a wide range of strategies rooted in the art of the 1960s and '70s.

Gormley laid the foundations of his work in the 1980s with figures cast in lead and iron from his own body. He commented at the time: 'Each work is a place between form and formlessness, a time between origin and becoming.' His goal was therefore not to complete laborious processes of transformation that ended in 'finished' works of abstract art. From the outset, he has sought to do more than write yet another chapter in the history of the aesthetic investigation of form. Indeed, his aims are universal in scope. He engages critically with human issues, with people as individuals, as members of collectives, as social beings and as objects, and he examines them in relation to space and nature. His overriding concerns, then, are social and philosophical.

Gormley's first efforts to achieve his goal resulted in self-contained, almost monolithic figures that seem like a mixture of ancient idols and casts taken from the void spaces left by incinerated bodies found in the ruins of Pompeii. This grants them a certain familiarity and means, in turn, that we can relate to them directly in emotional terms. It has always been the artist's declared aim to encourage such deep-seated responses to his work.

However solid and self-enclosed the figures, the viewer sees and senses in them the delicate point at which they metamorphosed from animate bodies into frozen forms. Each work owes its existence to a kind of 'skin graft'. At a ratio of 1:1, as it were, a warm human body with blood flowing through it and capable of movement has been transformed into a cold, hard, motionless sculpture. The drama of this moment, when life reverts to death, is the defining characteristic of Gormley's art. He converts the life in a body doomed to decay into the inanimate - but lasting - form of a work of art. This entry into the cold world of art facilitates transposition into the realm of the 'eternal'. Gormley gives this tragic paradox, inherent in all art, a distinctively compelling expression.

If Gormley's work had not progressed beyond an archaic figuration it would have marked just another stage in the long history of artistic endeavour. It was the exploration of new dimensions, mentioned above, that gave his art a future, rendering it fruitful and dynamic. He found the tools for this in avenues pursued by the avant-garde in the 1960s and '70s; those productive and influential decades in which the fundamentals of art were re-examined by the likes of Walter De Maria, Donald Judd, Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra. This involved process structured approaches, an intensified awareness of materials, an interest in industrial production techniques, a focus on here-and-now factuality that addressed basic conditions, a concern with redefining the role of the viewer and a new sense of time and space that resulted in engagement with the spaces of the natural world. In general these artists aimed to site their work within the context of new social, technological and intellectual experiences. Nauman's investigation of his own body, and his consequent decision to make the process of producing a work identical with its materials, proved to be of decisive importance to Gormley.

Nauman's early oeuvre became a kind of blueprint for Gormley's development of a critical dialectic for reconciling classic and avant-garde artistic strategies. 'Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square' (1967-68), in which Nauman balanced in various poses within a square delimited on the floor by adhesive tape, makes this clear. All Gormley's artistic concerns are adumbrated in this work: his interest in his own body, in his self; his exploration of such artistic parameters as movement, space and time; and his examination of rules established within the physically defining limits of gravity, mass and speed. At the same time he addressed the role of both the artist and the viewer vis-à-vis the work. The results of these investigations were at once intensely emotional, physical and cerebral. Unlike Nauman, who preserved the outcome of his researches in the relatively ephemeral form of videotapes, Gormley opted for the permanent physical presence of figures sited as 'places' in a variety of contexts. When interviewed about his CRITICAL MASS, he stated: 'I'm more interested in the idea of the body as a condition, like architecture is a condition. Once you admit the body is a place it is capable of being the ground for the generation of new meanings.' Thus capable of transcending the confines of artistic systems, he expanded the scope and the effectiveness of his work to encompass social phenomena.

A performative approach has guided all subsequent developments in Gormley's figures. He began letting their form reveal the entire process of their making. Regular grids of vertical and horizontal lines enabled him to retrace their production. After the plaster had set, the casts taken from the artist's body were divided into sections by a series of regular vertical and horizontal cuts. Gormley used such technical means as a kind of conceptual and aesthetic construction plan for the final sculpture. In this way the figures appear not as timeless objects in the traditional manner, but as the results of ongoing artistic thought processes.

A further basic factor characterises the paradigm shift accomplished in Gormley's work. This is the idea of the prototypical and the serial, which has helped him to embed his figuration in a wider artistic context. Although casts of his own body always form the starting point of his sculptures, in the early iron works (such as CRITICAL MASS II) the moulding process eliminates most of the detail in the features. The works become an 'art receptacle' fashioned from the volumes and skin of the human figure. By reducing the human form to a trace or index in this way, Gormley is able to release his figures from the bounds of traditional sculpture, set up on plinths in self-contained isolation and in accordance with their perceived function. He exposes his figures to modern perceptions of life, art and space. Chief among these are a critical engagement with mass as a constitutive formal and emotional element of sculpture, an exploration of the sculptural and existential significance of space in contained and extended modes and, finally, the crucial issue (of special significance in the artist's landscape projects) of human jeopardy and self-assertion in the world. Gormley's art revolves around these three concerns, each of which varies in importance from work to work but is always an at least latent presence.

In a compelling way Gormley has thus let the opposition between tradition and the avant-garde form a kind of ignition spark for his work. His distinctive artistic strategies confer a completely new, universal aspect of possibilities apparently exhausted by modern artists, notably Alberto Giacometti. As a result, thinking, making, seeing and processing no longer constitute a one-dimensional act of unilateral thought, but form part of a

multi-perspectival, multi-dimensional and multilateral process. Gormley lays claim to a role transcending that of maker to encompass that of a researcher on the dividing line between core and mass, the single figure and its disintegration, the occupation and dissolution of space, emptiness and fullness, movement and stasis, materiality and spirituality, urban life and nature, reality and ideality, the individual and society, social responsibility and basic freedom. His concern, then, is with the relationship between the self and the other, with the fundamentals of our existence in the world.

The works Gormley has chosen to show in Bregenz form a kind of a matrix of his complex attitudes to the role of art in our time - or, more accurately perhaps, to the role of people. That is especially true if the major landscape project HORIZON FIELD, originally planned for 2009, is taken into account in addition to the four installations in the Kunsthau. The latter, dating from the past fifteen years, are: BODY AND FRUIT (1991-93), on the ground floor; ALLOTMENT II (1996), on the first floor; CLEARING V (2009), on the second floor; and CRITICAL MASS II (1995), on the top floor. Gormley has made the interiors defined by Zumthor's architecture an integral part of all these works: they could not exist without the spaces. For the artist, who regards the body as the prime determinant of human nature, architecture represents a second body. This notion acquires particular validity in the context of architecture for art, and each floor of the KUB is an ideal receptacle for both people and works of art.

BODY AND FRUIT are two of the artist's 'Expansion' works. The cast-iron forms, apparently swelling almost to bursting point, define the volume attained by a human body regularly expanded by an equal measure in a crouching position. Their surfaces mark the delicate dividing line between a dark, invisible interior, perceived as harbouring the figure, and the surrounding space, an exterior defined by the geometry of the architecture and by the lighting. BODY AND FRUIT encapsulate a moment on the boundary between explosion and implosion, a moment at which an idea condenses into a concrete form.

Knowledge of the insides of the objects derives from the imagination; knowledge of the outsides from the evidence of the viewer's eyes. In this way the installation functions as an introductory statement to Gormley's ideas about the work of art. For him, the spectator experiences space as a constant exchange, an ongoing interior dialogue between physical and visual perception on the one hand and intellectual appraisal on the other. In BODY AND FRUIT he renders the heaviness of the objects almost tangible by suspending them from the ceiling on steel cords so that they hover just above the floor. This permits them to activate and dynamise the empty space of the architecture and sharpen viewers' awareness of their own movements.

ALLOTMENT II and CRITICAL MASS II show the extent to which Gormley is concerned with transforming physical into existential space. Comparison with Donald Judd's 'Specific Objects' reveals how he succeeds in reintroducing into art such basic human factors as life, soul, skin and spirituality, which would seem to have been forgotten or rejected by other artists. Gormley does so without swathing these elements in moral or social sentimentality through the use of fake metaphors or symbols. His works never lose their conceptual rigour. They demonstrate how it is possible to follow in the footsteps of a particular conceptual and formal artistic intelligence while effecting changes to it.

Among other things, Judd, like Gormley, investigates the relationship between interior and exterior in his objects. Freeing them from all traces of mimesis, he shields them from comparison with existing images and types of image. Judd's objects are pure products of art and, because they employ the materials and manufacturing techniques of post-industrial society, they form typical, ideal, neutral constructs embodying relations between matter, form and emptiness - and nothing more than that. In his figures Gormley also constantly engages with the issue of how different kinds of form affect empty space, yet, in contrast to Judd, he addresses such space not as an exclusively artistic phenomenon but as something replete with emotion. ALLOTMENT II, for example, consists of three hundred life-size modules of people aged between one-and-a-half and eighty, made from re-enforced concrete. The forms in this work and others like it evince a superficial similarity to the blocks of Minimalism while possessing an emotional charge released by the specificity of the intimate spaces based on exact measurements of the individuals encapsulated within them. In this way, the outside world metamorphoses into an inner world. The anonymous urban-like exterior of the blocks is invested with a dark, hidden, parallel inner life through the figures inscribed within them. This 'inside' becomes a projection surface for the viewer's thoughts and feelings, a mental force field for the interaction of body/sculpture, space and people.

CLEARING V traces space in terms of movement. An eleven kilometres long aluminium tube forms a line without beginning or end as it redefines the space housing it by twisting through it, this way and that. Walls, floor and ceiling serve as points of formal orientation and as surfaces to which to attach the material, but the new space-time continuum fashioned by the artist dissolves the pre-established co-ordinates of the architectural space. In our imagination we picture the work as a drawing executed by a huge hand. The visitor engages with the space in different ways - physically, by moving between spiralling sections of tubing, and mentally, by attempting to grasp the endless form visually. This turns a passive spectator into an active participant who recreates the form in the process of retracing it.

CRITICAL MASS II consists of sixty solid cast iron figures moulded from Gormley's own body. They hang, sit, recline, squat or crouch in twelve different poses. Here, as often in Gormley's work, two diametrically opposed extremes confront each other. On the one hand stands the unilateral character of a dense mass. It suggests power, strength and intense energy. This is the kind of effect that Richard Serra aimed to achieve and, like Gormley's, his sculptures take full possession of the space they occupy and generate responses founded not in any narrative formal practice but in a shift towards the viewer of the drama embodied in an emotionally charged mass. The spectator thus acquires a key role in the work. With Serra this takes the form of combined intellectual and emotional engagement, but Gormley's figures move beyond this to spark an existential dialogue between the work and the individual. Their very anonymity permits viewers to identify with the sculptures as a mirror of themselves and to put themselves in the figures' shoes, as it were. Beyond encouraging identification, the sculptures trigger projections and empathy. In this way the figure as an artistic construct or receptacle for organic phenomena becomes a focus and a generator of both existential confidence and existential uncertainty in the spectator. Pain and fear, for instance, need not be visible in the sculpture itself: they are articulated in the viewer as the result of a complex set of spatial interventions.

CRITICAL MASS II achieves this by poses indicative of torture and by the dramatic character of its presentation. In his book 'Masse und Macht [Crowds and Power]', Elias Canetti considered the significance of various human poses. Standing, for example, expressed the pride of free and independent people, sitting the dignity of the durable, reclining the disarming, crouching the retreat of individuals into themselves, and kneeling the prelude to a conclusion. Canetti's ideas conjure up images that resemble individual figures in CRITICAL MASS II. Gormley's installation, however, achieves its special intellectual force by means of the multilateral character of a serially multiplied mass and the tension generated by a constant oscillation between dissolution and condensation.

Multilateralism, the second of the two extremes mentioned above, works against a central focus and is thus an important factor in the democratisation of the relations between space, sculpture and viewer. Gormley has always been fascinated by this because it gives him the opportunity of extending

his work into the open spaces of nature. HORIZON FIELD, now scheduled for 2010, joins its predecessors ANOTHER PLACE (1997), carried out in the mud flats of Cuxhaven (Germany), and INSIDE AUSTRALIA (2005), executed in the Australian desert, as a bold attempt to bring together art and nature in a state of empathy. The aim of installing one hundred figures at a height of 2,039 metres above sea level derives from a desire to ask whether the familiar opposition of culture to nature cannot be replaced by an examination of art exposed to the elements and, by inference, human nature in nature. This, in turn, might encourage revised perceptions of our role as cultural beings.

Again, comparison with the work of an earlier artist will make clear the paradigm shift accomplished by Gormley. Walter De Maria's Land Art project 'The Lightning Field' (1977) proclaims in almost heroic terms the autonomy of art and, by extension, of all culture. 'The Lightning Field' lies at a height of 7,200 feet on a plateau in west-central New Mexico. It consists of four hundred polished, stainless steel poles, two inches thick and 247½ inches long, placed twenty-two feet apart to stake out a grid measuring a mile on one axis and a kilometre on the other. The poles are arranged so that their tips define an absolutely level plane, echoing the terrain. Nature here forms a grandiose backdrop for a demonstration of sublimity, evoked by the machine-made uniformity and beauty of the poles and by the mathematical exactitude of the grid. The work represents an act of unconditional freedom and self-assertion on the part of art vis-à-vis nature, made visible through the serial anonymity of the poles and their ordered configuration. The spectator experiences a value-free coexistence of two systems, their individual beauty enhanced by the dramatic form of their conjunction. Gormley, however, integrates and almost loses his human shaped masses within a field determined by a given topography that links the palpable, the perceivable and the conceptual in a seamless way.

Gormley's HORIZON FIELD unites all his basic artistic concerns on a large scale. Removed from the influences unavoidable in a museum context, it opens up a new web of relationships by siting art in a socialised natural landscape. For the artist, the mountainous landscape of the Vorarlberg region, with its distinctive mixture of natural beauty, urban settlements and old valley communities, represents an ideal arena for redefining the relation between nature and culture.

One hundred solid, lifesize cast-iron figures are to be set up in an area measuring 150 square kilometres. Irregularly arranged but all standing at exactly 2,039 metres above sea level, they will form a network of sites. In 'The Lightning Field' De Maria increased awareness of the sublimity of a self-contained system called 'art' by heightening its logical consistency through confrontation with nature. By contrast, Gormley aims to address issues relating to natural freedom and social embedment. Each of his hundred figures embodies a striving for both individuality and society. They face in every direction, but never towards one another. The distance between them, which varies according to the terrain, ranges from a few hundred metres to several kilometres. Together, they form a horizon that can be apprehended visually in separate sections and mentally as a whole, engaging the viewer's capacity for both physical and imaginative perception.

HORIZON FIELD does not aim to show humanity at the mercy of an omnipotent divine order, in the way familiar from some medieval images; neither does it seek to evoke the potential sublimity of socialised individuals in the isolated contemplation of natural sublimity, in the Romantic manner of a Caspar David Friedrich, or to establish an ideal artistic order in distinction to nature à la De Maria. Instead, Gormley literally comes down to earth in his project, to the reality of post-industrial landscape and society. But in no way has he lost sight of his original vision, which he describes thus: 'HORIZON FIELD is a clear indicator of a paradigm shift in art; that Culture which always used to be seen in distinction to Nature now has to be seen as integral to it . . . As with much of my work, HORIZON FIELD asks an open question as to where the human project fits within the evolution of life on this planet . . . It asks basic questions: who are we, what are we, where do we come from and to where are we headed? The work does this by engaging the physical, perceptual and imaginative responses of anyone coming within its relational field.'

Translated from the German by Michael Foster

---