

# ANTONY GORMLEY

## *ROD MENGHAM - VISIBLE ENTROPY*

From ATAXIA II, Galerie Thaddeus Ropac Gallery Paris/Salzburg, 2009

Antony Gormley's works in this exhibition are clustered around the implications of the Greek word 'ataxia', which refers to an absence of order. It is a term used most frequently to identify a medical condition in which a loss of coordination is progressive and attributed to a dysfunction of the nervous system. Of all the major bodily systems, the nervous system is the most modern, the most recent to come to light, and the most difficult to control; in many respects it remains mysterious, beyond even imaginative reach.

From the beginning of his practice as a sculptor Gormley has maintained a curiosity about the power and limitations of scientific knowledge and a determination to synchronize and fuse innovation in the field of sculpture with cutting-edge research in several scientific fields, such as molecular biology, quantum mechanics and computer imaging. But the distinction of his work resides in the imaginative excess of its configuration of elements, its response to installation contexts, its juxtaposition of sculpture and the environment. It is partly his dependence on the advances of the scientific imagination that enables him to project his work beyond it.

Gormley's earliest deployments of the human figure preserved the barrier of the skin as the basis of its integrity, but has in the last years begun a consideration of consideration of other subcutaneous forms of organization that are less precisely symmetrical and even somewhat rhizomic. But even in these works that go literally under the skin, that seem to run the gamut of biological and chemical networks within the body, the resulting complex structures have mostly been contained within postures that allude unmistakably to the architecture of the classical body.

Vitruvius is cited as the origin of conceptions of the body that relate its structure to geometrical forms and the classical orders of architecture. His treatise is the only surviving work of architectural theory from antiquity and is therefore the earliest possible source for correlative statements about the body and stereotypical form:

Therefore, since nature has designed the human body so that its members are duly proportioned to the frame as a whole, it appears that the ancients had good reason for their rule, that in perfect buildings the different members must be in exact symmetrical relations to the whole general scheme. However, while transmitting to us the proper arrangements for buildings of all kinds, they were particularly careful to do so in the case of temples of the gods, buildings in which merits and faults usually last forever[1].

Vitruvius not only attributes his principles of design to 'nature', he also gives them a temporal scope reaching into the distant past of the 'ancients' and the distant future of temples that must last forever. Sacred buildings must transcend human history (even if, in the Rome of Vitruvius, they are badly in need of repairs). The tradition that descends from Vitruvius through Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci—whose sketch of the human body contained within the forms of square and circle is perhaps the most widely disseminated of all images of humanity—has established the power over our imaginations of representations of the body that emphasise the desirability of conforming to standard. The geometrical aspirations of the classical tradition in sculpture have been secured by depictions of the body that illustrate the mathematical ratios governing its equilibrium, its assimilation to the fundamental imperatives of balance and symmetry. And yet this fixing of an ideal form as the basis of the way the body is imagined has erected principles of uniformity that do not exist outside of the classical tradition. There is no uniformity of body type even within the species of homo sapiens, let alone among related species whose extinction was guaranteed by the relationship between the proportions of the human body and questions of power and efficiency, not of aesthetics. Gormley's ongoing research into our constantly mutating understanding of the body has reached the point of both tactical and strategic resistance to the fetishizing of order that has universalized a body type produced by the chances of history.

Even the Vitruvian moment that generated what became known ultimately as the universal body type was not the summation of a long tradition of thought but the immediate response to specific historical pressures. Recent scholarship has explored the extent of its debt to the requirements of power and efficiency in eliciting ideological conformity to the goals of Roman imperialism.

Vitruvian theory did not crystallize the relationship between architecture and the body in general, but between architecture and the specific body of the Emperor Augustus himself. In this reading, architecture becomes the medium for rendering coherent the Roman presence throughout the known world; a policy of building everywhere according to the same principles is what persuades a variety of peoples with different cultures of the orderliness and rationality of the changes wrought in their lives; the fact that the uniformity imposed on their lives from without matches a uniformity found or imagined within, in the proportions of the human body, reinforces the seeming inevitability of their assimilation to the empire; the knowledge that every building is intended to relate to the proportions of the emperor's body not only confirms the emperor's strength and dignity but encloses his subjects

within the security of imperial space.[2]

This insertion of the Vitruvian body in its historical moment offers a prime example of the body's intimate relationship with macrostructural forms of power, and of the ways in which the body has always been used as a medium for ideological seduction. As Foucault has observed, power succeeds less by brute force than by smoothing the path of acceptance, by the 'simple fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge.'[3] It is precisely because art and architectonic form have converted the systematic demands of power into pleasurable forms of knowledge that they have acquired their own power to subvert those demands and produce irregularities in the system. Gormley's installations of groups of human figures, both within and beyond the gallery space, have comprised a spectrum of such irregularities.

They have disturbed the proportions of architectural space, often through supplementation, through the displacement of individual figures onto the roofs and walls of the building nominally the site of the installation. In the EVENT HORIZON installations, the movement of the viewer through the built environment becomes a passage through irregularity, as sculptural figures emerge into view or disappear, creating an infinite variety of forms of imbalance. Within these contexts, the repetition of the human form is not experienced as the duplication of stereotypes but as a phantasmal doubling, as individual figures advance and recede; uncanny presences and absences, embodied shadows, hesitations between identity and difference.

Within the rooms of the Villa Kast in Salzburg, Gormley's new sculptures represent a subtle but far-reaching interference in the force-field of neo-classical space, in a building that both renews the relationship between classical design and imperial ambition and that contradicts it, since by an historical accident it is also the site of a failed assassination attempt on the Emperor Franz Josef I. Both imperial and anti-imperial at once, this is a space that admits the historical nature of its relationship to time, and which renders its relationship to classical proportions uniquely vulnerable and circumscribed. With this building as their conceptual plinth, Gormley's sculptures are disproportioning presences, not merely in the way they reorganize its spatial relations, but also in relation to themselves and each other, since each figure captures a moment in the life of the body, a gesture or displacement activity that is precisely an expression of the human variable; the reverse of an ideal, the undoing of a stereotype. Gestures and symptomatic movements are minutely expressive of non-standard practice in the symbolic language of the body. Any given posture means different things at different times in different places, despite the powerful contra-indication manufactured by the classical tradition.

The first ethnographical study of gesture was in fact an attempt to relate the bodily postures of ancient statuary, vase painting, mosaics and frescoes to the language of gesture employed in the Neapolitan streets of the early nineteenth century. But the real value of Andrea de Jorio's 'La Mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano' (1832) was its comprehensive inventory of the meanings of a repertoire of gestures employed by a single community in a specific place and time[4]. It provided compelling evidence not of the stability and continuity of meaning through history, but of its transformation; of the constant change in conventions of meaning that affect the symbolic behaviour of the body as much as the forms of spoken and written language.

Gormley's figures are sculptural equivalents of this capture of meaning in flight. Disengaging from the classical endorsement of art that functions as a medium for permanence in a mutable world, he is now focussing on the creation of static figures that represent the fluid and unstable condition of all matter. The relationship between self-consciousness and body-consciousness can no longer be projected in terms of memory, coherence and regulation, but is forced to acknowledge a lack of coordination, an ataxia, between inherited ideas of the self as dependent on composure and consolidation and scientific observation of the perpetual transformation of the tissue to which self is attached.

In one respect, these anomalous abstractions of organic process resemble individual case-studies, reminding us perhaps of the freeze-frame moments of instability recorded by Eadweard Muybridge, or the taxonomy of expressions derived from the clinical records of Charcot. Muybridge has been shown to have engineered the fluidity of movement disclosed in his sequences of stills by editing individual images, while Charcot appears to have elicited the postures required to render more persuasive his theory of hysteria.[5] Both recruited an artistic medium in the name of scientific research, subordinating the interests of both to personal obsession with a conceptual scheme. But Gormley's practice offers neither diagnosis nor illustration of a pet theory, but a series of propositions about the unknown, about possible ways of feeling in an environment where the communication between the body and the world is no longer based on the classical premise that art and science are commensurable in terms of mathematical proportions.

Among Gormley's latest works there are corporeal figures assembled from blocks of varying shapes and sizes that recall architectural elements, and block-works of an architectural character that correspond to the scale of the human body. They relate to one another unevenly and approximately in a way that might have been intended as a response to Robert Smithson's call for an architecture that aligns planning with chance: 'Architects tend to be idealists, and not dialecticians. I propose a dialectics of entropic change.'[6]

The idealizing classical project based around forms of order that transcend history could only be maintained in a world of limitless territorial expansion. We are now inhabiting a world of territorial contraction, with more than half the global population living within an urban grid. The body-consciousness of the classical world cannot survive the abandonment of Vitruvian space, even though its twilight afterlife has shadowed our passage through the towns and cities of twentieth century and early twenty first century Europe. The massive disequilibrium of urban growth in the Second and

Third worlds is incommensurable with our civic imaginings and with the individualizing scope of most First world art. Sculpture presents a unique opportunity to place the viewer within zones of contact as well as within spaces for reflection, to move around representations of the body animated by entropic processes and contagious energies that affect, however inaccessibly, our own body-consciousness. Gormley's series of figures, encountered in sequence in separate rooms, creates a narrative of variables that requires its viewers to engage dialectically with their shifting sense patterns, tackling in the form of a constant improvisation, and in the space of a kind of architectural laboratory, a model of that entropic process in which our bodies, if not our minds, are already caught up.

Bodies are of course ensembles of different materials with more or less conductivity and subject to fluctuations of temperature. Sculpture cannot provide a match for the body's range of processes without turning itself into illustration, advancing anatomical knowledge at the expense of aesthetic experience. But in its use of material, a sculpture such as *STAND* can magnify on its surface the principles of transformation that pervade the body, the chemical reactions that produce rust functioning like bandages around the Invisible Man, converting into visibility a truth about corporeal existence that we could not otherwise access without translating it into the wrong terms, exchanging knowledge that we sense for knowledge that we merely hear or read about.

And the visual gymnastics of a work like *FEELING MATERIAL*, although controlled by its erratic circuiting around an absent body, is more eloquent about the thermally induced pressure that sent the lines of this three dimensional drawing hurtling through space, than it is about the contours of the body that launched it. The turbulence of the casting process does not stop short of our awareness of these works. The process of annealment, which reforms the structure of metal by heating and cooling it in order to give the same material a different temper, parallels the conceptual work of Gormley's sculpture which reforms the received image of the body in a way that prevents us from ever seeing it, or thinking about it, in quite the same way again.

1. Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, translated by Morris Hickey Morgan (Oxford University Press, 1914) p.74
  2. See Indra Kagis McEwan, *Vitruvius: Writing the Body of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003)
  3. Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: 1980) p.119
  4. Andrea de Jorio, *Gesture in Naples and in Classical Antiquity*, translated by Adam Kendon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991)
  5. Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, translated by Alisa Hartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004)
  6. Robert Smithson, 'Entropy Made Visible', in *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996)
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