ANTONY GORMLEY

FRANK MAES - A BODY IN SPACE

From APERTURE, Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium, 2010

Nature is beautiful because it looks like Art; and Art can only be called beautiful if we are conscious of it as Art while yet it looks like Nature.
- Immanuel Kant

My idea of a sculpture is a road. That is, a road doesn't reveal itself at any particular point or from any particular point.
- Carl Andre

Aperture. Diaphragm. Adjustable opening in a camera lens that regulates the amount of incoming light. In this exhibition, and in relation to one sculpture in particular, Antony Gormley intends 'aperture' to indicate, in the metaphorical sense, the moment in which a body opens itself to the space around it.

The first work in Gormley's APERTURE exhibition is an installation, entitled FIRMAMENT that extends from wall to wall and floor to ceiling. The installation consists of metal spheres connected by metal ribs. The first view of this space-filling work is from the outside. From this perspective the structure looks chaotic, as if it has been cobbled together in completely random fashion. The resulting image is difficult to take in, unreadable and, consequently, 'closed.' It does not allow you into its inner structure, visually or conceptually.

What is not visually possible does prove physically possible. Upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the room has not been completely filled by the installation; a space has been cut out of the structure. This recess has the shape of a human figure lying on its side, at approximately ten times life size. (The same figure has been realised as a life size sculpture, Set, in massive Corten steel and is shown in the next room.) It is possible, with some contortionism, to step into and through this cave-like hollow. As you do, your experience of the space and the installation is altered irrevocably; your perception shifts from the merely visual to the mainly physical. Through this largely intuitive experience of space and construction the structure now feels more obvious; clearer.

When you are able to look around yourself again, you can see coordinates on the ribs, specifying their position in space. The ribs form polygonal planes and the planes combine to form volumes. As you continue to study the structure you are presented with apparent contradictions. On the one hand you seem to observe a constant pattern: in most spheres four ribs converge, and the angles between the spheres are often roughly equal in size; that is to say, they are symmetrical. On the other hand, the pattern just described also shows so many holes and irregularities that you immediately have to question the said pattern's existence.

While the body intuitively feels its way around the space, the eyes can successfully ground themselves on the floor, walls and ceiling of the room. Here the spaces of the metal structure are, as it were, bisected by horizontal and vertical planes of the existing architectural construction. These bisects appear like clear line drawings on a sheet of paper. The lines form polygons that seem to eschew regularity. The symmetry that was still somewhat present in the spatial metal structure disappears in the two-dimensional cross section.

FIRMAMENT is the first link in a consistently curated exhibition. All presented sculptures show a similar - rather complex and advanced - geometrical structure, built up out of polyhedra (volumes or cells made of polygonal planes). More specifically, the recurring structure is tetrahedral: at each node (at the centre of the network) four ribs meet in a fairly symmetrical fashion.

In his text included in this catalogue, Roger Penrose positions this type of structure in the domain of 'topology': a branch of geometry that studies properties or laws that are not concerned with distances between points but with relations that do not alter under the influence of transformations or distortions. This type of tetrahedral construct is modular and flexible. The module is not seen as an object to be repeated identically, but as a collection of rules or procedures - consisting of a series of fixed parameters and a number of variables - that is able to adapt, grow and transform into complex geometrical surfaces and volumes.

The tetrahedral structure is not only a formal mathematical construct; it occurs naturally in physics (for example in the cell structure of bubbles and foam) and in chemistry (Penrose mentions the carbon atom). Gormley talks of bubble matrices. The structure can also be referred to as a particle cloud. It is one of many morphodynamic models currently being applied in biology, meteorology, psychology, sociology, cybernetics and urban planning; research domains comprised of dynamic, self-organising and developing, living systems which are also increasingly being used in architecture and design.

As in the rest of Gormley's oeuvre, the human body plays a central role in all works of the APERTURE exhibition. Sometimes it is explicitly present, in a transparent structure of metal ribs or in massive Corten steel. Other times the body appears in a more implicit, barely discernible fashion, as negative space; as seen not only in FIRMAMENT but also in a hanging structure called CLOUD. Even in the series of elementary abstract drawings presented in the sidelines of the exhibition, I can see the traces of a moving body in a scribbled circle.

We might wonder why Gormley makes human bodies solely and entirely from a topological bubble structure - or carves them away out of such a structure. And we might ponder why this underlying geometry, as Roger Penrose proposes, generates beauty.

This coherent exhibition can be read as an empirical exposé of the subjective experience. What happens here is nothing short of the collapse of the modern dialectic between empirical, objective science and romantic, subjective experience. And the artist provides us with a powerful suggestion of what is coming to take its place.

It is with some puzzlement that I look at the poses Gormley bestows on his figures. He presents quite a large number of hanging and falling figures; bodies that have no control over their own pose or position in relation to their environment, but are quite explicitly surrendered to the powers of gravity. The bodies in FIRMAMENT and SET lie in the foetal position, seeking shelter. Even the attitudes of the standing figures seem to project

neither autonomy nor dominance in relation to their environment, but seem more than anything to undergo it. This is true especially for BOND, a body in the garden that raises its hands before its bowed face in a significant gesture. These postures initially seem to be in contrast with the aforementioned scientific aspect of the sculptures.

In this exhibition Gormley pits a series of contradicting or complementary sculptural qualities against one another: massive and transparent; positive and negative; formal and formless; orderly and random; standing, lying and hanging; human figure and abstract structure. Additionally, he presents the complementary contradiction of the three-dimensional, polyhedral structure and the representation of that same structure in the two dimensions of a drawing.

Finally, there is the rather enigmatic figure, eponymous with the exhibition: APERTURE. The outside ribs have been systematically cut away. In this respect this work is distinct from all the other works whilst simultaneously - as its title, after all, suggests - being the heart or pivotal centre of the exhibition.

The exhibition raises a series of pointed questions, focusing on the general and fundamental question of what sculptural language can be used in today's world to convey the relation of the human body to its surroundings: room, garden, city, landscape, world, universe.

Gormley's lying and falling bodies bring to mind several textbook art historical references. They all date from the sixteenth century, when modernity was alive and kicking. A woodcut by Albrecht Dürer from his Unterweisung der Messung (The Painter's Manual: a study of the art of measurement), from 1525, shows a man sitting at the end of a long table (the time-honoured position of the pater familias). He has a pen in his right hand and is drawing on a piece of paper that has been divided by lines into squares. Directly before him, reaching exactly eye level, stands an object that looks somewhat like a miniature obelisk, upon which little stripes are marked at regular intervals similar to a measuring ruler. The table is divided in two by a window that covers its entire width, and it is also divided by lines into squares; the same number as on the sheet of paper. Needle and window together conspire to function as a viewfinder. The object being observed so minutely is a woman lying on the other half of the table. Her eyes are shut. Her rather wanton pose does not seem to have any effect on the observer. In the wall behind the table are two windows; the one on the right, behind the man's head, providing a view of a straight horizon slightly below his eye level. Above the curves of the female body a mountainous yonder unfolds.

This woodcut illustrates the objectifying and totalising perspective of the early modern artist most effectively. The core characteristics of that perspective are made explicit: the observer emphatically keeps his distance from the subject, positioning himself outside of the caged domain of his subject so as to maintain perspective and control at all times. The end result will not show the observer or the set of machinery used to construct the image. It is as if it were a divine viewpoint.

The modern observer (artist, architect, cartographer, scientist) aims to make the world transparent. Fundamental to this exercise are the rational Cartesian subject and the coordinate grid (the orthogonal x, y and z axes) through which the subject makes the universe, in its endless totality, homogeneous, measurable and transparent. This is visible in the grand perspective drawings of the Antwerp architect Hans Vredeman de Vries (Perspective, 1604/1605) for example. Here what is usually hidden from the eye is made visible with dotted lines. In one of the drawings a human body is lying on the table, as with the Dürer. In this case it is probably a dead body. Bart Verschaffel calls it the 'remainder of the perspective.' In his view the dead body is the only element that escapes transparency. I disagree. Vesalius and Da Vinci opened up and anatomically dissected the body long before then. It is not death that escapes modern vision but, on the contrary, life.

Pieter Breugel the Elder (c.1525-1569) seems to be a typical exponent of the Renaissance in the sense that his bird's-eye views provide an illusion of overview and control over his landscapes. After further consideration, however, it becomes clear how much - through his typical distribution over the image of often countless figures, engaging simultaneously in a multitude of exchanges - he forces or invites the viewers to make their own choices and robs them of every illusion of overview. One of the most brilliant examples of this process is The Bearing of the Cross (1564), in which the central event gets lost in the multitude of daily actions surrounding it.

Bruegel is also the creator of two of the most extraordinary falls in art history: Landscape with the Fall of Icarus (c. 1558) and The Conversion of Saul (1567). It is striking how, as the drama of Icarus unfolds in the background as a small, negligible event, the farmer in the foreground calmly continues to plough away. Similarly, in The Conversion of Saul the title event becomes an apparently inconsequential tableau, this time set in a magnificent mountain landscape. A powerful army is rising from the valley floor and sweeps upwards in one large masterful hyperbolic movement, drawing the viewer's eye. Saul's fall from his horse is easy to miss. The shape that the falling body takes on as it falls is also peculiar: a congealed hat, torso, arm and leg. It takes some effort to recognise a human figure, let alone a future church father, in this rather amorphous conglomerate, barely larger than a smudge. What a contrast with, for example, Da Vinci's Vitrivian Man (c. 1490). In this image, using the perfect shapes of classical geometry, the eternal marriage between human and cosmos is sealed. Breugel makes merry with this absolute, ideal order in an intelligent, subtle and yet effective manner. His multiplicity mocks the untouchable modern views. Gravity casually and suddenly makes its appearance, knocking classical geometry askew.

Roger Penrose writes about the 'beauty of geometry' that is at work in Antony Gormley's recent sculptures. How, as we asked earlier, can mathematics produce beauty? To address this we must consider the relation between art and science.

According to Immanuel Kant, we find beauty in something if it stimulates our cognitive abilities (imagination and mind); if it sparks these abilities, you could say, not necessarily as a wholly developed concept or idea, but rather in the form of a game without rules. And that is where art differs from science. Or where, one could say, art precedes science.

For Penrose, a mathematical proof or outcome is 'elegant' when it is 'non-trivial' or unexpected. Maybe we could deploy the term 'poetic' for that experience of elegance. In his book Le poétique the French philosopher Mikel Dufrenne describes the great importance of 'the first moment of observation' of the poetic experience. With regards to the scientific experiment he states that understanding not only means knowing how to act: 'it is also, rather than creating meaning, discovering it and enabling it to reveal itself naturally. […] Experience informs meaning and makes one say: yes, I see.'

For Dufrenne, the poetic is a very specific aesthetic category that stands in counterpoint to the sublime. An important part of twentieth century modern art is the quest to portray the sublime: a quiet, silent world, or state, that is completely alien to humankind. The poetic offers a world that gives humans shelter, in which they can - even if just for a moment - feel at home. In other words, it entails the recognition and expression of a possible

harmony or purpose in the relationship between humans and the world. You could call that 'elegance'. The sublime, writes Dufrenne, precedes the poetic, it prefigures the shepherd who celebrated the harmony between human and nature with his pan flute.

In his Critique of Judgement Immanuel Kant first writes of the judgement of beauty in artworks, then about the judgement of 'purpose' in nature. The (natural) sciences cannot describe nature as anything other than a 'blind' mechanism: on the basis of the causality principle (knowledge of cause and effect) it is stated how the 'mechanism' works and it can be predicted how it will always work. In his Critique of Pure Reason Kant highlights at length the exceptional achievements of the sciences, but in the case of living organisms the principle of causality, and by extension natural science, fails to deliver the goods. In such an organism, writes Kant, every element is at the same time the cause and effect of every other element. In modern terms one would speak of a 'circular and dynamic causality' and of 'self organisation.'

It is arguably a sensible option to hold one's peace on both subjects (the judgement of art and of living nature) and to just observe. As Wittgenstein famously tells us: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.' To which Heiner Müller retorted: 'Of which we cannot speak we must sing!' Be it art or living nature, Kant has understood that when we want to say anything sensible we are forced to add meaning and use metaphors as substitutes for that which we cannot formulate in objective terms. He has quite possibly said this best in the following words:

'We can regard it as a favour which nature has felt for us, that in addition to what is useful it has so profusely dispensed beauty and charm; and we can therefore love it, as well as regard it with respect on account of its immensity, and feel ourselves ennobled by such regard; just as if nature had established and adorned its splendid theatre precisely with this view.'

The phrase 'as if' in the last sentence is crucial. Kant was the first to emphatically point out that each natural organism is 'a goal in itself.' But at the same time he observes that, as humans, we encounter shapes in nature that we find beautiful and harmonious. Kant places the approach to living nature in the domain of subjective construction, even though it does strive for a certain generally applicable validity, because of the wish to express a common human experience. But there is no way to ever achieve more than an 'assessment' of a phenomenon; never the 'determination' or 'explanation' of its true nature. And so Kant introduces once again the subject (sitting at the head of the table, looking through the lined window), without changing or compromising the distant, external position that this subject occupies in his three Critiques.

He does compromise that position in his Opus Postumum, when he views the body as the possible link between the physical world and the world of the mind. He proceeds to describe an alternative form of natural science in terms of material forces: gravity, pressure, warmth, and so on. These forces are not dictated by reason but by experience. In other words:, experience dictates its fundamental properties to science. The observer is forced to leave his position at the head of the table and becomes a physical, tactile and inseparable part of the research domain. A crucial consequence of this position is that there is no more overview; any perspective you choose only provides a partial view of the situation. According to the posthumous publications of Kant, the science that can build a bridge between the two divergent views of nature (respectively based on reason and experience) is physiology, as the theory of the general principles of motor forces.

Gertrudis Van de Vijver, a philosopher at the University of Ghent who researches domains (including psychology, neurology and cybernetics) in which self organisation plays an important part, notes the great contemporary importance of Kant's insights. She also relates the fact that due to a number of developments since Kant's time (for example in morphodynamics and cybernetics), certain self-organising processes that Kant could only study through metaphor can now be understood with a certain level of rationality through the use of open, dynamic models. Following on the Opus Postumum, she emphasises that the cognitive subject, in the process of cognition, is in itself a self-organising system. Any study of a self-organising system is by definition relational and intersubjective:

'A self-organising system necessitates a choice of perspective and alternative forms of observation in order to render coherent the behaviour of the system. There is no preferred perspective in this - a more or less stable solution can only be reached through a process of selection, interaction, dialogue and renewed selection.'

A self-organising system forces us again and again to add meaning and will always elude a unique or absolute viewpoint that it is autonomous in relation to its components, including the observer or observers. In science the term 'emergent' is used for complex systems where the whole is not simply the sum of its parts, but 'looms' and 'emerges' in a shape that can never be completely predicted. You could say that in this domain science has started becoming art, or poetry. In cybernetics they have learned that the only way to construct an autonomous machine is to understand or model the project only partially.

Antony Gormley's FIRMAMENT remains chaotic and closed for anyone viewing it solely with a distant, objectifying perspective. Likewise, the 'cross sections' on the floor, wall or ceiling do not reveal the qualities of the spatial structure. This installation only opens itself to a bodily experience. In this experience, which is both physical and mental, the body is reminded of the essence of space: it cannot be overseen. In other words: it cannot be captured in an image.

Precisely because they answer to this definition, all the sculptures in the exhibition are essentially spatial. Like a cloud, a flock of birds, a firmament, or a painting by Bruegel, each sculpture requires multiple, different viewpoints which allow ever differing figures to appear. Set escapes the orthogonal schemes of Cartesian cartography, as do its magnified, negative-space antipodes in FIRMAMENT and Breugel's falling Saul. The lying body, with its chrystalline, polygonal, almost fluid structure, works as a catalyst, radically altering your experience of time and space. Set immerses you in a tangible geological space that can only be experienced in a subconscious and physical way.

The essence of APERTURE is an expression of conscious impotence; of the realisation that the sculpted human figure needs to be partially inadequate to be able to become an autonomous image, and that it is doomed to be continuously recreated by the equally powerless and awkward projections, memories and interactions of the onlookers. The fact that this will continue to happen is crucial for letting the resulting autonomous image emerge over and again.

Above all, the way in which the figure opens up to the window of light and greenery behind it is a vision of breathtaking poetry and beauty.