

ANTONY GORMLEY

LEWIS BIGGS - LEARNING TO SEE: AN INTRODUCTION

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'I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.'

Walt Whitman SONG OF MYSELF

A biographical approach to Antony Gormley's work would be justified, if for no other reason, by the fact that much of his sculpture is based on his own body [1]. Many of his sculptures are, literally, an embodiment of the artist. As a person, he has an immense capacity for enjoying life physically and intellectually: an ability to keep both his head in the clouds and his feet on the ground. His grandfather was a Catholic from Derry whose family had been dispossessed by the English. Like many Irish, he was staunchly pro-German during the 1914-18 war, but later married an English woman and settled in Walsall. His son, Antony's father, remained highly influenced by his Irish heritage and his strict Catholic upbringing all his life, and when he married a German physiotherapist from a Lutheran family she converted to Catholicism. Both Antony's parents were cultivated and intellectually questioning people, more able to feel at home where they lived among the émigrés of Hampstead than among the English.

Antony was brought up a Catholic, attending a Benedictine boarding school, and the universalising impulse of Catholicism, along with its spiritual disciplines, have continued to shape his outlook. He was close to his German grandmother, a warm personality who was very 'nature centred' and conscious of healthy living. During his childhood in Hampstead, Antony often went to stay with his German grandparents in Worcestershire, and later in the Black Forest when they returned to Germany in the early 1960s. Their respect for the material world and its organic processes found expression in his belief in the body as the ground of experience, the temple of life. So while his Catholic upbringing and schooling nourished a certain idealistic and spiritual discipline, he also inherited an impulse to celebrate the direct experience of being in the world, and the primacy of sense experience as a form of knowledge. This intellectual inheritance, the bequest of two generations, formed by a commingling of Irish and German, of Catholicism and rationalism, constitutes a kind of open-ended creative space which Antony Gormley has sought to give form to, through his life and work.

The desire to transcend the limitations of his schooling was perhaps the major impetus he brought to his studies - first archaeology and anthropology, then art history - as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge. Besides everything that a university education in the late 1960s provided, Cambridge also gave Gormley his first exposure to the art world. Through friendship with Mark Lancaster (and then Michael Craig-Martin, both artists-in-residence at Kings' College) he met leading British and American artists, including Keith Milow, Richard Smith and Barry Flanagan. Many of his student friends were architects, and with others he became involved in film-making. During the next three years, spent in India, he took a close interest in Buddhism and studied Vipassana meditation with a Burmese teacher called Goenka, an experience which has had a lasting influence on him. It was at this point he decided to become a sculptor.

While at Cambridge he had showed his independence from current fashion by writing a thesis on the twentieth century mystic Stanley Spencer, whose painting was at that time largely ignored by the art market, academics and artists alike. In so doing, he signalled his desire to align himself with an ancient artistic tradition in which angels can still be angels, as much for Rilke as for Dante, as much for Spencer as for Piero della Francesca. Stanley Spencer, in Gormley's words, subscribed to 'the idea of life as immersion' and 'the development of human consciousness as [life's] purpose'. [2] This is clearly also a statement of Gormley's own beliefs. If his aim, as an artist, is to contribute to the development of human consciousness, how is this to be achieved? His response is that art is 'an instrument for thinking', or perhaps (since thinking cannot be divorced from being) a catalyst for new states of being.

On his return from India, Gormley began a three year degree course in sculpture at the Central School of Art, London, but moved after one year to Goldsmith's College. At this time he made a group of works by draping cloth soaked in plaster over lying bodies, such as SLEEPING PLACE, 1974. They were prompted by memories of people sleeping in stations in India wrapped entirely in cloth, but the sculptural interest in the resulting shape comes from the fact that it both exposes and hides the body within. These sculptures were already preoccupied with 'edges', [3] meditations on the way in which a single membrane may both insulate and connect, conceal and reveal.

OPEN DOOR, 1975 was made by sawing a panel door vertically into thin strips which were then turned through ninety degrees and reassembled. It remains recognisably a door, but it is simultaneously both closed and open. It might also be seen as the 'Platonic idea' of a door along with its physical presence, or perhaps the secret 'innards' of a door along with its purpose - readings which suggest that the visible world cannot be taken at face value. In this way the work could be placed in dialectical relation to minimalism, then at the height of its influence, in which the 'primary structures' of Andre, Judd or LeWitt asserted that perception is everything, that what you see is all there is.

Gormley's post-graduate studies were at the Slade School of Art. His sculptures from this period, several of which have survived, show him continuing to use everyday materials presented in such a way as to accept and play on whatever associations they commonly evoke. For instance, LAST TREE, 1979 is a section of tree trunk carved away to reveal the lines of growth and, in the centre, the miniature 'original' of the tree, the sapling in its first year of growth. It undermines the proverb by giving us both the wood and the trees. It presents a slice through time: the past and the present along with a suggestion of the future of a tree. It presents an organic view of the world, a vision in which the microcosm, the seed, is present and equal with the macrocosm, the forest, and the individual related to the species.

On his arrival at the Slade, Gormley began to use lead as a sculptural material and it has remained of central importance to him ever since, both for practical reasons (it is both malleable and durable) and for its physical and associative qualities (its relationship with light, mass and its quality as an insulator and protector from radioactivity). FRUITS OF THE EARTH, 1978-9 consists of a bottle of Chianti, a revolver and a machete wrapped in layers of lead until each began to resemble an egg (seed or foetus). In this meeting of the artificial and the natural, the cultural artefacts' discrete

identity has been neutralised by the lead casing; like a grain of sand in an oyster, the irritant is transformed. A more elaborate work on the same theme is NATURAL SELECTION, 1981, a line of alternating artificial and natural objects, ranging in size from a pea to a football, encased in lead. It proposes that the artificial and the natural are equally part of the evolutionary process.

In April 1980 Gormley took part in his first international exhibition, 'Nuove Immagine', in Milan. He was represented by LAND, SEA AND AIR I, 1977-9, OPEN DOOR, 1975 and the drawing STILL RUNNING, 1979, (re-made in 1981 in earth colours and re-titled EXERCISE BETWEEN BLOOD AND EARTH), in a section of the exhibition called 'Archetypes'. The exhibition celebrated the plurality of approaches of the younger generation, but ecological and cross-cultural impulses were strongly represented. It had been arranged in the aftermath of the success of the Italian Transavanguardia, a number of young artists who shared a figurative approach in the late 1970S at a time when this was still unfashionable.

In June of the same year he married the painter Vicken Parsons, and they bought a dilapidated house in South London. It was their home and studios, and required a great deal of labour to make it weatherproof. Here Gormley made BED, 1980-1, from waste 'Mother's Pride' white sliced bread which had been returned unsold to the factory. BED carries on it the duplicated imprint of the artist's own body, eaten out by him from a 'mattress' of bread (the slices were preserved by soaking them in wax). Although in some sense a marriage bed, it has often been remarked that it evokes a tomb in which the lying figures are seen in imprint rather than in effigy.

In the summer of 1981 Gormley exhibited four sculptures and a drawing on the upper floor of the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. The chalk drawing was the life-size EXERCISE BETWEEN BLOOD AND EARTH, 1979/81, the image of a running man repeatedly inscribed like the ring marks in a tree trunk, or a finger print. ROOM, 1980, consisted of

the artist's clothing shredded to ribbons and the ribbons tied to form an enclosure between four posts. Here also the body is implied, if not delineated, and related to a specific space. Common to all these early works is Gormley's approach to the body by its absence. And although his work appeared to change radically in the last months of 1981 and spring of 1982, this absence of the actual body - within a work which is a sign for the human person - has remained a central strategy for him until the present.

The change in Gormley's work coincided with his participation in a landmark exhibition of 'British Sculpture in the 20th Century' held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in Autumn 1981, the first such survey to be attempted for many years. It included an alabaster sculpture by Jacob Epstein called ELEMENTAL, 1932, a figure crouched in a foetal position, looking up. Gormley was deeply impressed with this sculpture - perhaps affected by the fact that his first child was to be born in April 1982 - and it became one of the catalysts for him to concentrate more fully on the body as his main subject. [4]

MOULD, 1981 (which forms part of THREE WAYS: MOULD, HOLE AND PASSAGE), was Antony Gormley's first lead body sculpture, the prototype of a working method forming a large part of his output: '...the sculptures are made from my own body. Each work starts with a real body in real time and comes from a real event. It is not dissimilar to a photograph. I adopt the position which I have selected for a sculpture and am wrapped in scrim, which is an open-weave jute cloth, and plaster. Because the plaster dries quickly, within ten minutes, the work is divided into different sections... The whole process takes about an hour, perhaps an hour and a half. Then I am cut out of my mould and it is reassembled... It is a bit like going to the hospital to have an X-ray. Breathe in and hold it, the technician says. You are aware that there is a transition, that something that is happening within you is gradually registering externally. But for accuracy, it must be a moment of stillness, of concentration. I am trying to make sculpture from the inside, by using my body as the instrument and the material. I concentrate very hard on maintaining my position and the form comes from this concentration'. [5]

Once he has reassembled the mould and worked on the form, he strengthens it with a thin layer of fibreglass. Then roofing lead is beaten into place over the contours of the mould until a complete skin is achieved, and the lead plates soldered or welded together. This complete skin therefore hovers something between one quarter of an inch to several inches above the place where the artist's actual skin once was. The sculpture is literally a case for a person, analogous to the sloughed skin of a snake or discarded chrysalis.

In the majority of the body cases the sheets of lead (on one occasion copper, and more recently cast iron) have been soldered, or welded, with the seams running true to the absolutes of horizontal and vertical, rather than along any internal axis of the figure. Thus the anatomical structure of the body is replaced by a structure of the surface: subjective states are carried by objective mapping.

The idea of self-knowledge through an interior relationship with the body in action is familiar to athletes, actors or musicians. For instance, Yehudi Menuhin practised yoga, 'to induce', as he said, 'a primary sense of measure and proportion. Reduced to our own body, our first instrument, we learn to play it, drawing from it maximum resonance and harmony ... we refine and animate every cell as we return daily to the attack, unlocking and liberating capacities otherwise condemned to frustration ... our fundamental attitudes to life have their physical counterparts in the body'. [6]

LAND, SEA AND AIR II, 1982 another three-figure work, evokes the relationship we establish with our surroundings through our senses. One is crouching with ear to the ground, one standing upright and gazing to the far level horizon, and the third kneeling with head raised, as if breathing deeply. Although the senses are located in the skin, on the periphery of the 'person', as it were, we know that they are active at a distance from the body as much as internally to it. The free passage of information across the barrier of the skin is an indication of the fact that our being is similarly unfettered by our visible boundary. We can aspire to be both here and there simultaneously. These sculptures are about being in a space, about the whole sense field. The work becomes a way of sensing space.

The single figure has continued to be central to Gormley's sculpture. One recent work is LEARNING TO SEE, 1991. Standing in front of it we feel drawn to take account of ourselves. On one level this is no different from the feeling of meeting a new person. But this is not a person, it is the artist's presence removed from the flow of time. The 'measuring up' and 'affirmation' are made in relation, rather, to some felt potential of us as viewers. It is initially a physical process. We notice the horizontal and vertical seams which relate so strongly to architecture or landscape. We become conscious of the way we are standing, whether upright or leaning, one leg forward or both together, and so on. The lack of surface features, and the concentration of the pose, quickly produce an empathic response drawn from the reservoir of our own feelings. As Yehuda Safran suggests: '... these sculptures do not distract us with likeness, they have no distinctive feature, they make us aware of the whole. They invite our particularity, our souls are invited to dwell in these bodies...'. [7]

When Rilke remarked, in his essay on Rodin, 'Whoever had the power of seeing and producing all forms, would he not ... give us all spiritual emotions ?'[8], he was articulating a belief in the co-extension of the material and spiritual. Whereas it was possible, up to the beginning of this century, to maintain that the human being and the human image had 'integrity' (and mirrored the essential integrity of the cosmos) our minds - if not our bodies -

tell us now that personal and epistemological integrity are at best under threat, at worst illusory. A note in Gormley's sketchbook of 1984 seems to reaffirm Rilke's contention: 'My body contains all possibilities. What I am working towards is a total identification of all existence with my point of contact with the material world: my body ... Part of my work is to give back immanence both to the body and to art'.

Towards the end of the decade, Gormley developed further new ways of working. Alongside the continued development of the lead figures and their counterparts in iron, there were works in clay, concrete, iron 'expansion pieces' and lead boxes. Each adopts a different strategy but reflects on the same range of concerns: how to present simultaneously both the earthly condition of the body and its imaginative or spiritual transcendence.

VEHICLE, 1987, can be seen as a surrogate human being in much the same way as medieval cathedrals were built in the image of man. (The modern solo glider is so precisely designed as an extension of the human body that it needs the body's weight to enable it to fly). Its title, 'Vehicle', draws attention to what is being transported as well as how. This is not the idea but the embodiment of flight. It shows the human soul in its aspiration.

A group of works of the late 1980s is a quartet of pairs of 'boxes'. Each pair appears to link one of the organs of sense (the sense of feeling is not represented) with an internal organ. 'The senses are a kind of reason', said St. Thomas Aquinas (as paraphrased by Eric Gill), meaning that they lead us to reality'. [9] INSTRUMENT and EXPOSURE, 1988/93 are a box with alabaster testicular or ovary-shapes on top and a box with eye holes. The sense of sight is apparently allied with the organs of reproduction. Together they might be thought to repeat the idea of PEER, 1983-4, making the connection between the two ends of the nervous system, the head looking at the tail.

A second pair is BODY AND LIGHT, a brain cast in tree-resin resting on a box and MEANING, a box with a mouth-hole, 1988/93. These might be representations of the sense of taste and the organ of consciousness. In the third pair, AUGUR, two kidneys in brown alabaster resting on a box and ORACLE, 1989/93, a box with holes at the ears, hearing seems to be allied to the organ of purification. And in BRIDGE, a box with nostril-holes, and CENTRE, 1993 with a tree-resin heart placed on top, the sense of smell is juxtaposed with the organ of motivation or desire. These highly pungent works reduce the body to its essentials but the result of reduction is an abstracted notion of its 'spiritual' functions. Traditionally, Western medicine made connections between the internal organs (liver, pancreas etc) and the temperamental life through the 'humours'. But Gormley's lead boxes perhaps refer more easily to the yogic 'chakras', or centres of energy. In yogic thought, the three main paths of energy in the body run along the spinal column, and along two channels starting in the two nostrils and ending at the base of the spinal column. The chakras are distributed along the spinal chord where these three paths intersect, and are associated with (but not located in) specific organs. Four of the more important chakras are associated with the generative organs, the kidneys, the heart and the cranium.

Taken together, this quartet of boxes reiterates the assertion that the way we make sense of the world relies on interior as much as exterior data. One commentator has noted that for Gormley, 'space... is not only external but includes the inner space given in thought, or in the lungs and other human organs which are connected with the outside by bodily orifices'. [10] Gormley relates a recurrent childhood reverie before sleep in which 'a matchbox theatre space behind the eyes became an infinite wide extension of space in front of me'. [11] He has remained fascinated by the way that consciousness can be so much larger than the space which contains it, by the relation between the infinite extension of the imagination and the physical constraint of our senses. We can be both at home in the body and mental travellers at the same time.

The concrete works are concerned with concentrated space. ROOM II, was made to show at the Serpentine Gallery in February 1987, and consists of vertically stacked cubes of concrete (with two inch thick walls) and holes left for the mouth, ears, anus and penis. It is, as the title suggests, a piece of architecture: a cell for a human body. It reminds one of the Buddhist shrines into which a person may be bricked up, leaving only one point of communication with the outside, a hole through which food enters and excreta exits. In such an incarceration, sight would be hugely reduced in importance, while hearing would become acute. In the work of the same title, 1980 the artist's clothes were shredded to create a fenced area or 'corral'. While the earlier work expanded the 'skin' of the person to the size of a room, in this piece the world is contracted to become the second skin of the person.

ROOM FOR THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN DESERT, 1989, made during a residency in Sydney, was closely modelled on ROOM II. It was conceived as a counterpart to FIELD FOR THE ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, 1989 - taking a concrete architectural 'place' to the vast red clay of the desert in the way that FIELD brought the 'organic' clay into the formal architecture of the Gallery.

The later concrete works forgo the alliance of architectural space with body space and are closer to the lead moulds: they are blocks, containing the space vacated by the artist's person. FLESH, 1990, IMMERSION, 1991, SENSE, 1991 and HOME OF THE HEART III, 1992 are concentrated catalysts for sensing space. Using mass to describe the spatial relationship between the artist's body and the condensed interior of the early concrete rooms, these blocks set up a powerful dynamic with the space in which they are shown, engaging the body of the viewer in the interface between the space in the room and the space inside the block; the walls of the room and the rough surfaces of the block.

In 1990 Gormley began a group of cast iron 'expansion' works which decisively break the human scale of much of his sculpture. STILL RUNNING, 1990/3, is a reprise of the drawing of the same title of 1979 (above, retitled). A mould was made of the artist in a running position, and then a second mould was made by measuring out a fixed distance from all points of the skin, an exact enlargement which (like the drawing) nevertheless generalises the shape of the artist beyond appearance. The expansion works represent a significant development in Gormley's work for their attempt to replace the body in the natural hierarchy of forms without recourse to the identification of the body. In a mysterious conversion, it is as if the aureole of the body is made solid and impenetrable.

Gormley has shown a preference for his body works to be photographed out of doors in rural landscape, but also in urban or industrial settings. He has also made sculptures specifically for exterior and non-gallery sites. The development of FIELD from the Australian version owes as much to 'monumental' as to gallery sculpture. During 1988 Gormley invested considerable energy on a project for a 120 feet high building in the form of a standing man, to be built in brick for a site at a railway junction near Leeds known as the Holbeck Triangle. The project was never realised, but its central idea - the equivalence of clay bricks in the figure to cells in the body and so to individuals becoming the 'body' of the community - re-emerged in FIELD FOR THE ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES. In this latter work, small clay figures are organised into a magnetic force field, [12], implying a greater whole within which the parts have their place, in the way that the individual has a place in a community. A further development of 'Field' was more specific in placing the artist himself within a particular community - made up of over sixty members of an extended family of brickmakers in Mexico. It has subsequently been made again in the Amazonian rain forest, in Malmo (EUROPEAN FIELD) and in St. Helens, near Liverpool (FIELD FOR THE BRITISH ISLES). The idea is simple: a group of people join together to turn clay into a myriad of small figures, which are then fired and stood up, like a crowd all facing the same way, to entirely fill a room. Each person is invited to form the work in their hands, one at a time, but because each person's hands are different, as is their use of them, the final figures are also unique. By working together the participants

begin to sense themselves as a collective body, even if previously unknown to each other, and at the same time create an image of that collective body. The simplicity and elegance of the idea are matched by its visual and emotional impact. Minimalist sculpture emphasised material presence through seriality and scale (very often filling all the available space). In 'Field', each figure derives its scale and shape from the hand of the person making it, and its position in the final installation is likewise the result of intuitive process rather than a predetermined order. While using some of the strategies of minimalism to capture the senses, it subverts the impersonality of minimalism through emphasising the hand-built and unique nature of each unit.

The questions it evokes are both physical (the effect of population growth on our diminishing common resource, the earth) and metaphysical (the relation of the individual to the whole). But its most powerful suggestion, and one which is central to Gormley's work, is that we are witnessing something in the act of becoming. Waves of figures stretch out with the fullness of an ocean. Because they are small, like seedlings planted out, the figures suggest potential growth, a sense of becoming.

NOTES

1. 'The development of the work is above all tied to my development as an individual'. Antony Gormley, in conversation with the author 15 March 1993.
 2. 'Cookham's Present', in STANLEY SPENCER: A SORT OF HEAVEN, Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1992, p 7.
 3. In his exploration of myth THE TIME FALLING BODIES TAKE TO LIGHT (a book Gormley found inspirational), William Irwin Thomson writes: 'Edges are important because they define a limitation in order to deliver us from it. When we come to an edge we come to a frontier that tells us we are now about to become more than we have been before', St Martins Press, New York, 1981, p 8.
 4. Sandy Nairne, 'Such Stuff as Dreams are Made on', in ANTONY GORMLEY; Städtische Galerie Regensburg / Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1985, p 48.
 5. Interview with Roger Bevan in LEARNING TO SEE, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg, 1993, p 34.
 6. Yehudi Menuhin, introduction to B K S Iyengar, LIGHT ON YOGA, London, 1966, p 13.
 7. Yehuda Safran, introduction to LEARNING TO SEE, *ibid.*, p 27.
 8. Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Rodin', SELECTED WORKS, London, 1954, vol I, p 140.
 9. Eric Gill, ART, London, 1934, p 125. This sentence is underlined in Gormley's copy.
 10. Veit Loers, 'Calling upon Matter', in ANTONY GORMLEY; Städtische Galerie Regensburg / Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1985, p 40.
 11. In conversation with the author, 15 March 1993.
 12. The viewer is invited to enter the work by the pathway and at the centre becomes the focus of the gazes of the 1100 pairs of eyes, similar to the relation of the sapling to the amphitheatre in LAST TREE.
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