ANTONY GORMLEY INTERVIEW WITH DECLAN MCGONAGLE

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Declan McGonagle: Why would you say you are a sculptor rather than any other kind of artist?

Antony Gormley: When I started as a child it was as if learning to draw was the most important challenge that art had to offer. By the time I was fifteen or sixteen I had learnt a kind of drawing and from then on the challenge was in being able to make the illusions of the two-dimensional surfaces more and more convincing - in the end that wasn't enough. Once you accept that painting is an object in the world and that its relationship with the viewer is more important than being a window onto another world, you are already making sculpture.

DM: Was it a conscious decision to be a sculptor?

AG: In India, I realised that sculpture was, for me, a more profound way of challenging reality. But painting is still in some respects at the back of the work. Some of the recent work like HOST or FIELD treats the space of the room not dissimilarly to the space of the canvas; the frame of the room is not dissimilar to the frame of the canvas.

DM: FIELD actually requires a threshold.

AG: The use of the threshold is a kind of framing. But I hope what I've done with those works is test the implicitness of modernist field-painting. To actually go in the other direction: FIELD makes life its subject. It re-opens the old window onto our world but from the side of the art. A gaze or an energy comes towards us and it is not polite.

DM: The group of works you showed in an old prison building in Charleston's Spoleto Festival in 1991 seemed a very complete statement of your values and the forms you are now using.

AG: For me Charleston was the first exhibition that dealt with the wider terms of the work. It was me looking back over the last ten years and taking the opportunity of that Old Jail building to set up contrasting energies of freedom and containment. Removing windows and all the electricity was very important so that, rather like we have done in the room in Dublin, time is engaged through the passage of natural light. Time passing in relation to the stillness of the objects in the room becomes an active principle into which the life of the viewer also becomes immersed. In Charleston it was lovely because the orientation of the building was axial and you had the passage of the sun from the West side to the East side that had different effects at different times - depending on whether it was illuminating the rich red of the terracotta pieces or, in the evening, shining through the windows over the room full of mud. There was an acoustic effect too. By losing its glazing, the building became a kind of ear through which the feeling of the interior became amplified by the outside being more present. You could hear birds singing and the children in the playground in the housing project that surrounded the prison. There was also a breath the movement of the wind through the building giving it another kind of life. It was a liberation of a building about which the black people around it say, 'That's the place they used to lynch us'. I wanted to take the building and identify it as a body. I do feel that the way that we dwell in the body is like the way a body dwells in a building, which may be even more true of a prison. I then wanted to insert different objects and fields within it, changing from fluid to cellular, from condensed to expanded - the idea of passage was very important.

DM: It's very unusual to have had the opportunity to show such a range of works which took the body from its primal slime through to another state.

AG: I'm very glad you've picked up on that. The idea is that through the building I set up parameters of sensation and invitations to contemplation. So there was a contrast between the two levels: on the ground floor, mud that had passed through the fire and had been touched, and on the second floor, elevated primal ouse, pluff mud taken from Charleston harbour, mixed in sea water. The flooded room was another way of describing a Modernist Tabula Rasa, but with the idea that the potential for life was there. Sea water, organic mud, the smell of it, the sympathy that it had with the light - which again held a strong relationship to the lead pieces that were in the room opposite. Then on the other diagonal were these platonic bodies, three hollow steel balls four feet in diameter, which because they had been made from spun steel, had a vortex inscribed on their surface. So touching the surface of the earth you have the idea of a celestial body that has been brought into our realm, and then opposite and above were the five body cases passing through the ceiling - or hanging down from it. Here are corporeal bodies escaping from the normal conditions of a body: they could be rising, hanging, or perhaps floating and seen from below like swimmers in a pool. As with all the insertions into architecture, the idea was to undermine the expected conditions of being-in-a-room: they are in the room but not in it at the same time. The hexagonal back of the prison consisted of two iron-clad spaces. On one side I installed two expanded body cases linked across an existing plaster and brick partition by steel pipes that connected the genitals and mouths. It was like a huge fungal brain and had to be constructed in the cells. On the other side was a single bent copper pipe, open at one end, that passed through the ceiling - a kind of umbilicus connecting us to somewhere else.

DM: You have used lead, concrete, iron and in HOST in Charleston, river mud, to make sculpture. Where does material and its manipulation sit in your preoccupations as an artist?

AG: At a certain stage I accepted the Buddhist position; I wanted to deny desire. I saw desire in some way as a false economy of art. The desire to aesthetically possess or be possessed. Hence for the last ten years the preoccupation with enclosing things in an aesthetically neutral material. I chose lead for the same reason as Maillol did for his nudes; he wanted to have a tension between the sensuality of the form and the distancing effect of the material. In about 1984 I realised that clay was an important material. There was a time just after I moved into the new studio when it was just full of clay and I was trying to find a way of making that wasn't imposing an image on the material but allowing a one-to-one relationship between my body and the body of the clay. The forms arose naturally from the space between my hands; clay was another way of dealing with the flesh. Out of this the very first ideas of the FIELD work came. I must have made several hundred before they had eyes and I then realised that eyes were life! Somehow that was a return to desire. With FIELD, joy in material contact is there: it is about touch and touch expressed for its own sake. Touch not just of my hands but of many people's hands. Gone was the feeling that in order to be serious there had to be extreme distance between the personal engendering of the work and its public showing.

DM: It seems you did not allow yourself to enjoy the material, to be seduced or to exhibit that seduction in the final work, until recently. Did you find yourself getting to a point with material and then deliberately distancing yourself?

AG: In the early 1980s I wanted my body to be the prime material. I didn't want the viewer to be seduced by the work for the wrong reasons, I wanted it to be a kind of objective appraisal of my relationship to the world. I am very aware that all dialectical thinking has limited use. We are setting up oppositions between unconditioned and conditioned attitudes but taking on the body was a desire to touch things deeper than at a dialectic level, which was different from a lot of my generation's attitudes to material and how material and meaning coalesce.

DM: That sounds as if the distancing is possibly more than just material.

AG: I can well remember, at five or six, the first feeling of not belonging, and wondering whether I was really the son of my mother or father or whether I was some kind of implant. I think I had this sense from very early on (that I got from my father because he was always coming back from India, Malaya or Australia or somewhere) of there being another place where things were different, and that was the place for me. From the moment I escaped from monastic education I was looking for another world view. I left the sacraments, and yet up to that point, Catholicism had been the central moral and life-supporting structure and remains a vital witness, because it is something that needs replacing. I need to build something as strong as that.

DM: Having had a religious, Catholic upbringing I recognise that impulse. Is your practice then built on the expression of anxiety rather than its resolution?

AG: What you recognise in the pieces in Derry and I recognise in the FIELD is a witnessing of our life but is in some sense also a judgement of it. A lot of the anxiety that I feel comes from the tensions between the chaos of daily life and the sense of judgement in the Catholic moral values with which I was indoctrinated at an early age. I was told as a child that I had the devil in me. Anxiety comes from feeling judged, from not being accepted. I want to start with things that just are, that cannot be judged because judgement does not alter them.

DM: Do the works themselves enter the world as witnesses to this process, like CLOSE as an idea but also in its siting?

AG: What I hope CLOSE does is test the notion of site as a fixed place with the idea that nothing is fixed.

DM: As if material has coalesced momentarily in this form but is capable of melting again? The force being described in the piece is what allows us all to 'hold on' momentarily.

AG: At this latitude we are spinning at IOOO kilometres per hour through space. Through the figure you feel the tension between the force of centrifuge (that threatens to fling us out into deep space) and the forces of gravity; that sympathy between bodies that keeps us stuck down. What CLOSE is, is a body holding on for dear life. What it describes is a fixed point in a shifting world.

DM: There is an axis described within The Irish Museum of Modern Art, centred on a formal courtyard, which would provide an amazing context for CLOSE.

AG: That's a great idea, kind of underplaying the idea of frame and yet at the same time acknowledging it.

DM: The Royal Hospital building [which houses the Museum] and its formal gardens were constructed on ideas about ordering that shifting world. We establish order here and we defend it so we build formal gardens and we look out over the demesne. From the Great House we see the formal gardens but we must also see the wilderness beyond, in order to feel that we are 'holding on '. Order is emphasised by setting it against the wilderness.

AG: Trying to hold on at a time of chaos, desperately trying to make something solid which is, in fact, moving.

DM: This seems to be a period when things are moving very fast. Brian Friel once quoted Tyrone Guthrie talking about how he had spent an afternoon keeping the bush out of the yard and went on to say that, after all, that is what we are all doing, isn't it, keeping the bush out of the yard!

AG: I think that for me the challenge of our times is to recognise that culture is an extension of nature: that art is a part of a natural system which leads us back to our nature in nature. All we have been saying up to now is a house needs a bog in order to feel its houseness, but in this formula the bog is always seen as the other, and what we have to recognise is the bog in us. I recently contributed a version of CLOSE to a Biennale in Japan where it is an alien presence in a dinosaur park of international style sculpture. I would say that it engages with the exposed nature of that site and therefore 'works'. The intimacy of the work is a point of experience in that place of bogginess, and high wind. My work has been characterised as trying to carry on traditions of the transcendent or the utopian, but I'm not sure about that. I think what it tries to do is talk about some base in a very confusing world by confronting the earth. Because CLOSE makes a relationship between itself and the earth, I think by implication the things that are on top of the earth in its vicinity are also implicated, and that includes the viewer.

DM: So transcendental or utopian readings of your work are too easy?

AG: Yes I think it is an easy reading because it suggests that through the work there is an image of release and I think it's more like ... the opposite.

DM: Is it a doorway towards anxiety?

AG: I don't think it is that, either. I'm not sure that it is a doorway. There are two lines of Bob Dylan's that might help: 'Death is not the end' and '90 miles an hour down a dead end street'. There is a kind of collective madness that is taking us towards a terminal point, but there is also a feeling that this bodily existence of ours is only one level of existence. But I don't know what the next thing is, and the work doesn't pretend to know what the next thing is, either. All I'm trying to do is materialise the uncertainty and to isolate some point of contact between consciousness and matter.

DM: My eight year old son is starting to ask from the back of the car - if we are going to die what is the point of living?

AG: What was your answer to that?

DM: Tell me who has the answer to that?

AG: Well the answer is being here.

DM: So all you can do is be here? Our human condition is about unknowing and uncertainty rather than knowing?

AG: Yes. I believe that whatever there is beyond is connected with what is here, and you can have a sense of dispersion of self when you sit for a while doing nothing but just being conscious of the body and feeling that attachment to body and self, me and mine disintegrate and you are able to experience energy rather than objects: that is freedom. Maybe people would call that death.

DM: Have you described FIELD in the last few sentences?

AG: That's a very nice idea. The idea of being a place is rather like one consciousness being subsumed within a wider consciousness.

DM: Would you make a distinction, then, between your use of the body and other current preoccupations with the body in the work of an artist like Kiki Smith, for instance, whom you feel sees the body as text?

AG: Yes, I think her interest in the body is, in a way, analytical, but I think what's great about the way that she uses that analysis is that she recognises that the alimentary or neurological systems have a strong metaphoric meaning in terms of human society generally. But I still find the work plays on a peculiarly American phobia about the breakdown of the body or fear of disease - playing almost a doctoring role to that culture. I am not so concerned with recognition of the functions of the body. I am much more interested in the space that the body is. What is that space that you inhabit when you close your eyes?

DM: It's interesting - this idea of work doctoring to a particular culture. Does your work doctor to any particular culture?

AG: 'Doctor Heal Thyself', is more my line, and that means finding the other half of life that my upbringing excluded me from - which is an encounter with the earth, the body and the unconscious. I believe in guardian angels. Your fate is not simply your own doing. You know my parents gave me the initials AMDG (Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam): For the Greater Glory of God. I can remember, when I was about six, my father taking me to one of the factories in his charge, when he had a foundation stone laid with AMDG on it, and a cross, and the date, and saying 'This is yours'.

DM: It must have looked like a tombstone.

AG: It did look like a tombstone. But the sense that the shape of my life was known somewhere else was something that I grew up with, and is both a limitation and a kind of enabler, because I don't think I would have set off at eighteen into the unknown without a guardian angel.

DM: So A CASE FOR AN ANGEL is a declaration of faith?

AG: A CASE FOR AN ANGEL is a declaration of inspiration and imagination. It is an image of a being that might be more at home in the air, brought down to the earth. On the other hand it is also an image of somebody who is fatally handicapped, who cannot pass through any door and is desperately burdened. When installed it is a barrier across the space, blocking out the light and blocking the passage of the viewer. The top of the wings are actually at eye level and describe a kind of horizon beyond which you can't see very much, and so you feel trapped and there is a sense of an invitation to assert yourself in the space against it. It is an attempt to re-invent an idea of the object against which you can pit yourself, as in a Serra or a Judd, but differently.

DM: Are you trying to draw upon a tradition or continuum which predates the Renaissance, which is pre-modern and still viable?

AG: Do you mean magic - how is that different from Modernism?

DM: Well, the large scale exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984, 'PRIMITIVISM' AND TWENTIETH CENTURY ART, far from re-affirming the principles of Modernism, demonstrated its redundancy! To disconnect art from its social meaning, and value it only in terms of its formal properties, does a disservice to both the so-called 'primitive' practice and Modernist practice. Modernism (the idea that events result from human action) and magic (the premodern) may come in and out of focus in human history, but possibilities for both exist now. It's what makes this period particularly interesting, as we come to an end of particular values which ran from the Renaissance through the Reformation, the Enlightenment and nineteenth century Capitalism.

AG: There is a recuperation of both modernism and magic. This goes back to finding the other within. It's interesting in relation to the question: 'Is the work transcendent?'. A CASE FOR AN ANGEL is not ironic. I do believe that we can be transported or be the agent of our own transcendence. Maybe transcendence is the wrong word - but the idea that flight, in gliding, depends on weight and its correct position, is fantastic. I like the marriage of anatomy and technology. It isn't a kind of Icarus - you know, little bird feathers. I want something that is very concrete. In terms of the idiom, you can see the technology and we know that it works. The expansion pieces are the opposite. They go the other way, and try to talk about the human extension into the organic world of cells and vegetables.

DM: You have said that the body is a collection of systems, that these systems can connect with other elemental systems.

AG: There are two ways of connecting with the elemental and one is technological and the other biological, and I think they are both valid, and both necessary. They both have to be made conscious - not extraction-orientated, integrational rather than exploitative and divisive.

DM: You seem to make that very visible in SOVEREIGN STATE - the innards occupy more space than the material bodies you have created.

AG: I wanted to make an image of power deposed. Of a king pushed to the floor, lying next to his support mechanism - which echoes his biological internal mechanism. In expanding the body case, it began to look like an astronaut's suit. In destroying the hierarchy between the stratosphere and the earth, between the king and his subjects, one of the principle transitions of the work is to make the viewer himself the subject of the work, and that is also part of the sovereignty that the work depicts. Then I began to think more about the orifices and the necessary connections and I wanted to connect the mouth to the anus, and the penis to the navel, and now in this installation we're going to have one room full of these pipes and in the other the astronaut-like expanded piece. The pipes will be heaped on the floor, like a telephone exchange in a crisis.

DM: But the body itself is quite muddled, isn't it?

AG: No, the body is the way it is. The mind is muddled. One's first relationship is with one's body. Then through one's body one begins to build up another kind of constellation of affection and, hopefully, an emerging sense of some kind of purpose. The sense of emerging purpose that a family describes has to be re-possessed as one of the points of resistance against the dispersal of self in consumer values.

DM: You constantly use an image of another kind of dispersal in your discussion of the work, from individual pieces using lead, to the collective in FIELD, and now to the new iron work which is made up of several pieces.

AG: I'm thinking of calling the work TESTING A WORLD VIEW. The work is a kind of psychological Cubism. An identical body cast made from the interior of a body case five times, which I then try to test against architecture. The piece expresses the polymerphousness of the self; that in different places we become different and I think this is physical. If Cubism is about taking one object and making multiple views of it in one place, this is a dispersion of one object into several cases for itself.

DM: Does it always have to be your own body?

AG: I want to confront existence. It is obviously going to mean more if I use my own body. The optical and the conceptual have dominated in the art of the twentieth century and I turn to the body in an attempt to find a language that will transcend the limitations of race, creed and language, but which will still be about the rootedness of identity. It isn't just an idea about finding an idiom that could be universal, in a way that Modernism failed to do, it is an invitation to recognise a place and a base of consciousness. The body - I keep coming to this idea - is a moving sensor. I want the body to be a sensing mechanism, so your response to the work does not have to be pre-informed and does not necessarily encourage discourse. We are taught to use vision as an identifying force, which allied to discriminating intelligence fixes a thing. So that the strategy, for example, of Richard Deacon, deconstructing the physical world by suggesting multiple readings and denying anyone in particular, is one possible strategy. But if you believe in subjects, which I do, you have to find another way. If my subject is being, somehow I have to manage to engage the whole being of the viewer. I have always been bothered with the idea that the most visible bits of the Western figurative tradition of sculpture are dramatic muscular actions made in marble or bronze like the DISCOBOLUS, the LAOCOON, or that fantastic Bernini work, DAVID. What it suggests is that human potential can only be expressed sculpturally through the depiction of action. That moment of placing one foot in front of the other which began with the archaic Kouroi and continues with Michaelangelo's SLAVES, suggests that muscular action expresses the metaphysical tension between spirit and body, but I'm not so sure. Rodin momentarily recovered from that trap with his AGE OF BRONZE; presenting a moment of becoming. What started as a heroic image of the soldier ends up being internalised and becomes a moment of self-consciousness within the body. For me this reconnects with the timelessness of pre-archaic Cycladic Greek sculpture which obviously uses the body in a completely different way as presence rather than actor. The head always addresses itself to the sky. There is something very powerful about the way that both Rodin's AGE OF BRONZE, and the Cycladic heads connect being with the infinity of the sky, suggesting human potential, but not in terms of movement. I want to recapture that sense of imaginative space inside the body. I want there to be an internal pressure in the work, that has a relationship with the atmosphere which we sense with our bodies through the skin of the work.

DM: How else do you engage the viewer?

AG: Through scale; FIELD makes the viewer feel big, and the expansion pieces make one feel rather small. Playing on scale (which is not the same as size) makes us feel our bodies-in the-world.

DM: How does that work with the concrete pieces?

AG: The block describes the space between the body and a compressed notion of architecture, and what I find makes them quite tender is that the principle gesture of all those works is touch. Materiality in sculpture invites touch. They don't. The body that touches is not there and what is touched is space, engaging the air. The concrete has become, as it were, a necessary conditionality. The work has always identified the minimum space necessary for a man to occupy but I think the concrete pieces do it in a more intimate, open and direct way. There is a real point of contact with the particularity of my body - slipped from life into art, with every wrinkle of the knuckles embedded in the concrete. Maybe the concrete works have found a new way of engaging with the central premises of western sculpture: the relationship of idea to raw materials, image to block.

DM: Are you trying to articulate the silence of the minimal cube?

AG: I think there are other kinds of silence, which are different from the silence of formal certainty, and which can encourage subjective response.

DM: Judd has very powerfully mapped out an absolute in the physical and theoretical territory of his work. It's interesting that Jefferson mapped the Western states of the United States as a grid, as absolutes, and then sent the explorers Lewis and Clark to confirm them. Conception came before perception and demanded a complete invalidation of what and who was there originally and their relationship with the territory. Dominant forces simply do not recognise the 'other' and in that sense neither does puritanical Modernism.

AG: In FIELD, the earth is being allowed to carry the voice of the other to re-affirm the spirit of the land that lives through the people. The American FIELD has a strong presence of the original inhabitants of that continent. This is distinct from the pioneers' dreams of possession of the land, where a map is conceptualised ground. I want to make the ground fruitful for the mind. The grid you have drawn - that imposes on the land - is distinct from the aboriginal intuition which is one of human consciousness being a continuation of the land, the feeling that they are embedded in the land, which is to do with the continuum between human and mineral life.

DM: There is a distinction here between the idea of living and the idea of being lived. Aboriginal cultures across the world have different concepts of possession of the land. Since there now seems to be a terminal sense to nineteenth century expansive Capitalism - of which Modernism is a product - different possibilities must exist for collaborative relationships, such as those involved in making a work like FIELD, in Mexico, and then the making and showing of it elsewhere, as you have done in Malmo, and will do in St. Helens.

AG: There are lots of things to talk about here, but for me, one of the most important things is that through sharing the engendering of the work, the makers are also the work's first audience and it is not like the audience of a spectacle. It's more like a collective experience of active imaginative involvement. I am inviting a group of people to spend some time with the earth in a way that they wouldn't normally do, to touch it again and again. There is a ritual which is important. We work on the floor at the level of the work.

DM: Could you call it harvesting?

AG: It is a kind of harvesting - it's about tilling the earth with your hands but instead of making something grow, it is the earth you are forming directly. The harvest comes from within the people, or the thing that is growing comes out of the people. Everyone has their own row and throughout the project they continue to do row after row on the same strip like the old medieval strip field and they build up a very strong relationship with that patch of earth. Those gazes that they are seeding in the clay look back at them as they are working, suggesting that consciousness is not only inside. I see it as a kind of soul garden. It is a fragile thing but it is a link - both personal to the person who is making them and also common to all of us - something to do with the way in which the figures house the memory. That memory is transpersonal and yet we all have a personal relationship with the future. For me, FIELD is the consummation of being the other, a kind of liberation in many ways - of many ways.
