ANTONY GORMLEY

STEPHEN BANN - THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

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Sometimes it is said today that the work of contemporary artists has completely taken leave of the issues that concerned their predecessors in the Western tradition. It is as if we needed one pair of eyes to look at the achievements of a medieval, or Renaissance master, and quite a new pair to look at (and make sense of) the work produced by an artist of our own time. My own impression is that the situation is a little more complicated than that. Certainly it is true that we can develop stereotyped ways of seeing, which appear to fit the works of the illustrious past and cannot accommodate those of the present. But the genuinely creative approach renews the appeal of the past artist at the same time as it engages with the challenge of the contemporary period. It is a commonplace that, at the turn of the century, critics and connoisseurs rediscovered the forgotten Piero della Francesca at the same time (and, we might say, with the same eyes) as they were engaging with Cézanne.

Our own period is no exception to this rule. It is true, of course, that Modernism, with its concomitant abstraction, seemed to put a full stop after the many centuries of figurative art, and propose a completely new starting point for the visual artist. But what the modernist impulse turns out to have destroyed is not tradition, or figurative art, but a certain way of reading the tradition of figuration: one that Norman Bryson has described in terms of the myth of the 'essential copy'. [1] What has been destroyed, in other words, is a particular way of interpreting the mimetic role of the work of art, its status as a 'copy' of elements in the external world. Surfeited as we are with the new technologies of photography, film and television (not to mention 'virtual reality'), we can no longer accept the crude principle which has nonetheless been refined by countless critics and commentators over the centuries: that the excellence of a work of art depends on the degree of perfection with which it succeeds in simulating a referent in the 'real' world.

But a new, and vital, question arises at this point. If we throw out mimesis - the 'essential copy' - then what remains? It may no longer be credible to hold, as Ruskin did in some respects, that art is a long and arduous ascent to the point where technique is finally adequate to capture the superlative grandeur of the natural world. But abandoning this evolutionary theory does not imply dismissing altogether the continuous, if problematic link between the images of art and the forms of the external world, which is based not solely on technique but on the operation of religious or magical connections.

A recent and influential work by David Freedberg, aptly titled THE POWER OF IMAGES, makes this point very forcibly. In one of his opening chapters, he quotes a fascinating passage from the work of the contemporary German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer:

'... if it is only at the beginning of the history of the picture, in its prehistory as it were, that we find picture magic, which depends on the identity and non-differentiation of picture and what is pictured, still this does not mean that an increasingly differentiated consciousness of the picture that grows further and further away from magical identity can ever detach itself entirely from it. Rather, non-differentiation remains an essential feature of all experience of pictures ...' [2]

Put simply, this means that the process of 'copying' the external world is not something that outgrows its primitive, magical origins, or becomes displaced on to the primarily technical pursuit of an 'essential copy'. The picture (and here of course Gadamer's point also applies a fortiori to the three-dimensional realisations of sculpture) cannot throw off its inheritance of 'magical identity', that is, the condition in which it manifests directly the power of what it presents. Clearly this is a feature above all of religious art, and Gadamer is categorical in stating that religious art, in this respect, is not an aberrant category but the 'exemplary' instance for the whole 'picture-making' tradition: 'In it we can see without doubt that a picture is not a copy of a copied being, but is in ontological communion with what is copied'.

In beginning this essay on Antony Gormley in this way, I intend not to divert attention from its contemporary validity, but to indicate, on the contrary, the multiple processes of re-interpretation which help to account for the timeliness, and rightness, of a particular means of expression. What I am arguing is that Gormley's development as a sculptor over the last two decades is not merely an autonomous process, which can be traced through a sequence of characteristic themes and a gradual evolution of techniques. It has been a process of understanding, and that understanding has been a measure both of his participation in the current, complex revaluation of the Western tradition, and in the more recent history of a Modernism that has turned itself inside out, so to speak, in the fulfilment of its own logic. The works grouped together in this exhibition are therefore, on one level, an extraordinarily convincing demonstration of how to extricate oneself from Modernism without (one might say) breaking the mould. [3] But they are also compelling instances of the proposition that artists, too, are engaged in fundamental intellectual research: their mode may be governed by the special, intrinsic law of form, but their insights rejoin at a more basic level the combined insights of the critics, historians and philosophical thinkers who are engaged, in their own domains, with re-interpreting the world in which we live. [4]

I want to dismiss straight away, however, any impression that my emphasis on 'religious' or 'magical' properties (as defined by Gadamer) would imply a sentimental reconciliation with outworn and exhausted habits of thought. 'Religious art', as it is made today, almost invariably turns out to be a pastiche of some earlier style or manner, and hence no art at all. But this does not stop contemporary art of the highest quality recalling the 'magical' or 'religious' precisely in the domain to which Gadamer draws attention: that of the feature of 'non-differentiation'. Antony Gormley's SOUND II, 1986 recently installed in the sometimes flooded crypt of Winchester Cathedral, creates an unforgettable effect of presence. It is not an image with a traditional iconographic reading. In fact, like all of Gormley's recent sculpture, it is the product of a cast taken from the artist's own body, which is given its own identity through a particular choice of attitude and gesture. But if it is not 'religious art' in the sense of representing a particular saint or prophet, it partakes of the 'non-differentiation' signalled by Gadamer. In the reduced light of the crypt, the specific technical features of Gormley's work - the dull glow emitted by the sheets of lead and the fidelity of bodily reference ensured by the casting process - produce a subtly commingled effect. We see a figure which is both distanced and near, produced by a technical process which is amply evident from the soldered joints between the lead sheets, and yet imposing itself as a presence in the vaulted space. Semiologists have an exact way of expressing the perceptible difference from traditional concepts of representation which this effect implies. The figure is not only an 'icon' - hence related to its referent by a simple relation of resemblance - but also an 'index' - related by direct contiguity in such a way that, like a death-mask or a footprint, it remains a material trace of its referent. This is a feature which is not just incidental, but helps to determine our whole attitude of viewing.

Such an achievement can, by its very aptness, help us to see other configurations of work and context in a new and fresh way. My first acquaintance

with Epstein's sculpture of LAZARUS, 1947-8 installed in the retro-choir of New College Chapel, Oxford, was not a particularly happy one, as I missed the intense lighting of the modern museum and was puzzled at the grey pallor cast over the figure of the resurrected Lazarus as he struggles to free himself from the toils of his linen winding sheet. Gormley's work helps me to reinterpret not only the context in which LAZARUS is placed, but also the strange and compelling tension with which Epstein has invested it, on the sculptural level. Of course the work is carved in stone. But something of Epstein's ambivalence - as a carver of egregiously modernist icons and as a modeller of naturalistic clay busts - seems to come through in the very representation of the laborious spiral movement. A body seems to force itself from within, so that the formal patterning of the stone folds appears ready to flake away in response to it.

Lazarus is indeed a precedent to bear in mind when looking at Gormley's sculpture, since the image of the decayed body brought suddenly back to life conflicts so decisively with the ideal, heroic tradition of sculpture which we derive from the Greeks. For obvious reasons, we associate the representation of Lazarus more closely with the pictorial than with the sculptural mode. But even in paintings, the enigma of the resurrected body of Lazarus has given rise to fascinating speculations on the representational status of such a body, which seems to elude the conventional economy of mimesis. The English critic William Hazlitt writes about Sebastiano del Piombo's great painting 'The Raising of Lazarus', 1517-9: 'The Lazarus is very fine and bold. The flesh is well-baked, dingy and ready to crumble from the touch, when it is liberated from its dread confinement to have life and motion impressed upon it again'. [5] Hazlitt is appealing to the vivid evidence of the senses - the sense of touch in particular - in order to conjure up the plastic effect of a body represented in an extreme condition of paradox, both 'well-baked' and instinct with lively motion. It is an effect strangely parallel to that of Gormley's lead-coated sculpture, where the 'baking' of the molten material never distances the body so far as to erase the impulse of life. We might easily extend this point to take into account the whole issue of the representation of the dead - but revivified - body in the Western tradition. Sebastiano del Piombo's master, Michelangelo, developed to a hitherto inconceivable extent the powerful implications of the dead body as icon. In a late work like the RONDANINI PIETA, the figure of Christ is an inert mass following the forces of gravity. But as its heaviness draws it down to the earth, its symbolic power invests it with energy, and produces a reverse, upward movement which we can interpret as the burgeoning of the life force.

The installation of a work like SOUND II in a religious building encourages this train of comparisons, impelling us to a re-reading of Epstein's modernist sculpture at the same time as it refreshes our perception of Renaissance masters. But it should be emphasised that it is not the context, however inspired it may be, that enables Gormley's sculpture to function in this way. On the contrary, these works can irradiate the neutral, apparently context-free spaces of the modern gallery, in such a way that a similar experience takes place. CLOSE I, 1992 for example, spreads the human body into four diagonal, linear impulses which extend its energy across the flat floor surface: lead tends, however slowly, to 'creep' in accordance with the law of gravity as a result of its considerable weight, and this state of the sculptural body seems to reconcile an entropic and an energetic motion. A CASE FOR AN ANGEL II, 1990 extends the body laterally in two dimensions, and contrasts the contained nucleus of the body with the beaten lead 'wings' which offer it buoyancy and equilibrium. (In the context of the exhibition, VEHICLE, 1987 likewise appears as an extrapolation of bodily impulses and properties to the domain of the expanded space). It is noteworthy that in the technical description of these pieces Gormley does not stop at declaring the medium to be lead - the external carapace which meets the eye but also specifies the materials lying beneath the surface: in the case of CLOSE I, glass fibre, plaster... and air. SOUND II is filled with water, CLOSE I with air. The elements flow in and out of the sculptures just as, through transpiration and respiration, they flow in and out of ourselves.

There is, however, a reference point in recent art which has to be taken into account, before we can fully appreciate the dynamic relationship which Gormley establishes between the work and its spatial context. Looking at the way in which he distributes a sequence of solid iron body forms holding 90° angles, placed in different positions across the room, we might well find a memory stirring of a similarly resourceful animation of the gallery environment - and we might be surprised to realise that we were thinking of one of Robert Morris' minimalist installations of identical metal units. In the case of the Gormley work, we would notice the particular effect of muscular tension implicit in the bodily posture of these sculptural figures, variously configured in relation to floor and walls. But the strategy would still seem comparable, not to say directly related. That this is not just a random association, or a purely formal comparison, seems to me to require some justification. And this can be found in the recent revaluation of the whole phenomenon of Minimalism which has been provided by the French critic and art historian, Georges Didi-Huberman.

In 1992, Didi-Huberman published two complementary studies of contemporary sculpture, both concerned with the inadequacy of prevalent distinctions between 'abstraction' and 'figuration'. The first, Le Cube et le visage (The Cube and the face), addressed itself to a single enigmatic work by Alberto Giacometti, 'The Cube', 1934. The second, with the evocative title Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde (What we see, what looks at Us), [6] looked at the development of minimalist sculpture from the 1960s onwards in the light of Walter Benjamin's notion of 'aura', and Michael Fried's well-known distinction between art and 'theatricality'. [7]

Although the detail of Didi-Huberman's argument cannot be reproduced here, the message which emerges from both studies is unequivocal, and highly relevant to the work under consideration here. It is as if he were rescuing the whole notion of 'abstraction' from a kind of prohibition which it had been forced to undergo, as the most distinctive, pace-setting mode of modernist art. Where Benjamin proclaims the loss of 'aura' in the 'age of mechanical reproduction', and Fried attacks the 'theatricality' with which minimalist sculpture places itself across the path of the spectator, Didi-Huberman sees both positions as attempts to deny an incontrovertible fact: that abstract sculpture does indeed have presence, and that it is a presence derived from our sense of another body which mysteriously, yet uncompromisingly, stands in our way. Michael Fried was right, in other words, to compare the aesthetic effect of 'theatricality' which, as a modernist, he so detested, to the sense of being invaded by the silent presence of another person. But Didi-Huberman treats this phenomenon not as a radical defect, but as an affirmation of the continuity of an artistic tradition which is, in its origin, inescapably religious: he illustrates next to Tony Smith's 'Die', 1962 and Donald Judd's hollow cubes, the empty tombs of Fra Angelico's 'The Last Judgement'.

It is not at all necessary to assert that Didi-Huberman's reading of Minimalism is 'right', whilst the official position both of its protagonists and its assailants (like Fried) must be classed as 'wrong'. Certainly the declared aim of the minimalists was to expel every vestige of anthropomorphism. But equally certainly, the character of their work (and of some of their early writings) betokens a recognition of the dyadic nature of the act of seeing: 'what we see' is also 'what looks at us'. No one who has experienced the effect of one of the outstanding minimalist installations - for example, WEIGHT AND MEASURE, the two-part work installed by Richard Serra in the axial galleries of the Tate Gallery in 1992 - can deny that their occupancy of space is incomparably more powerful than a reductive reading of their elements would lead one to suppose. And it is not necessary to rely simply on the experience of spectators to substantiate this point. The unequivocal evidence of the development of a sculptor like Antony Gormley is there as well.

For the current exhibition demonstrates beyond a doubt that, for Gormley, the example of Minimalism proved to be serviceable in a way which indirectly supports Didi-Huberman's analysis. He is not of course unique in this respect: sculptors as diverse in their achievements as Robert Gober,

in America, Pascal Convert, in France, and Stephen Cox, in Britain, have all worked from a basis in minimalist sculpture to a preoccupation with the human figure, without abandoning the resourceful use of space which characterised the minimalist sculptors. But Gormley is certainly one of the artists who has retained at the deepest level the sense that Minimalism was not a rupture in the sculptural tradition, but a reinforcement of its deepest continuities. One of his earliest significant works, BED, 1980-1 can in fact be seen as a revision of the notorious EQUIVALENT VIII, 1966 by Carl Andre, which stirred up controversy some years after its entry into the collection of the Tate Gallery. It is not simply that Gormley replaces the standardised bricks with industrially produced bread, and leaves the imprint of his body on the horizontal surface. This could be seen as a directly contestatory gesture, whereas in fact Gormley has emphasised that the relationship involves a kind of revaluation of the work by Andre, which is itself also a base, and could be thought of as a kind of bed or table. The new work therefore does not reject, but more exactly recuperates its predecessor: in a sense, it humanises retrospectively a work which had suffered, and was still to suffer, from the effects of a particularly arid artistic controversy.

Gormley's continuing and productive engagement with the minimalist example is, as I have said, demonstrated by the evidence of this exhibition. I spoke at the outset of Modernism turning itself inside out, and this does seem to me a more effective way of looking at the current period than is warranted by the permissive philosophy of Post-Modernism. For an art like that of Gormley does not just declare itself emancipated from the modernist legacy, and free to invoke any and every cultural precedent. It reinterprets the past from the inside, so to speak. Whether we locate as our basis of continuity the 'non-differentiation' between the work and the referent noted by Gadamer, or the implicit human presence in the most 'abstract' of containers, we can collect evidence not only from the writings of critics and philosophers, but from the particular forms which Gormley's work has come to adopt.

These comments apply especially to the recent sculptures which, together with the lead and iron body cases already mentioned, make up the major part of the exhibition. The cast concrete pieces, with their abstract forms, and smooth surfaces infringed only by the external sign of a body part breaking through to the outside edge, are surely inescapable metaphors for the implicit human presence in the minimal form. We can find out about the technical procedure which the artist followed: in this case, the production of a wax cast from his own body which is 'lost' (by the traditional cire perdu technique) within the concrete mould. But this does not alter the fact that the indexical presence of that 'lost body' must be sensed by the spectator: it must be reconstituted, by a process which we cannot really call 'conceptual'. To put it another way, we know that the geometrical form contains, in its hollow interior, the imprint of a body. But at the same time, we see, through the very index of the hand or head that breaks the surface, the impenetrable inner space that forms the negative of that body. What seems to be called for is an act of empathy, or trust, to which the work convokes us. I am reminded of Verrocchio's 'Christ and St Thomas', on the facade of Orsanmichele in Florence, where the sculptor has shown the moment of the apostle responding to Christ's invitation, and putting his hand in the open wound. In a certain way, Antony Gormley's concrete pieces also stage, for the adventurous or doubting spectator, a drama of the mystery of incarnation.

One of the significant effects of a concrete piece like SENSE, 199I, in the context of this exhibition, is to remind us that even Gormley's lead sculptures were never, in a traditional sense, iconic. The generalisation of bodily features by the properties of the lead sheeting, and the evident soldering of the joints, always distanced them from the illusionistic mode of neo-classical sculpture, while stressing the indexical link with a particular, rather than an ideal body: these were (and are) moulds, in some ways akin to the leaden 'Malic Moulds' with which Duchamp invests his bachelors in THE LARGE GLASS, 1915-23, but of course jettisoning Duchamp's ironic distance in favour of an absolute authorial identification. In the further series of 'expanded' works which are featured in this exhibition, the limits of indexical reference - indeed the limits of any bodily identification - are even more strenuously tested. A work like STILL RUNNING, 1990/3 suggests an obvious modernist pedigree. We might think of the ability of a sculptor like Jean Arp to devise concrete forms which relate at the same time to the animal and the vegetative world: these connotations of the fruit ripening, or the seed burgeoning, are certainly not out of place in considering these large iron casts, whose free-floating poise is sometimes emphasised by them being suspended from the ceiling. Yet once again Gormley is working on the transformations of the body, which remains, quite literally, at the unseen core of the sculptural form. By a systematic process which is analogous to the traditional 'pointing' of plaster casts for reproduction, he establishes a network of lines which sprout from the body cast, and establish surfaces whose relation to the original figure can sometimes be deduced by the spectator. Gormley's concern, however, is not with the legibility of the figure, but with moving beyond the barrier of appearance, and posing questions about our place in the created world.

This concern to avoid any element of formalism in his representation of the body, which is evident in the whole range of work displayed here, finds perhaps its most striking expression in the remarkable installation entitled FIELD. In this case, Gormley has filled an entire room with tiny clay figurines whose common characteristic is their intently staring gaze. (At the original installation of the work at Salvatore Ala Gallery, New York in 1989, the number of figurines was only 150, but by 1991, at a later showing, the total had increased to 35,000, made in conjunction with a family of brickmakers in Cholula, Mexico. The two versions shown in this exhibition are again collaborative ventures. EUROPEAN FIELD, shown in Malmo was made in Ostra Grevie, Sweden; FIELD FOR THE BRITISH ISLES, shown in Liverpool and Dublin, was made in St Helens, England). No more eloquent demonstration could be imagined of the dialectical nature of the act of seeing, and of the truth embodied in the title of Didi-Huberman's book: What we see [is] what looks at us. But it would be wrong to present this work as in any sense the demonstration of an abstract theory for its own sake, when the logic of its presentation is so clearly embedded both in the tradition of modernist sculpture and in the development of Gormley's own career as a sculptor. On the one hand, FIELD can be viewed as the conclusive disinvestment of the sculptor in his own body image, and the achievement of a dimension of otherness which is not only technical (the collaborative element) but (one might say) existential. We as spectators become the focus of a gaze which is firm and inflexible, without being menacing. On the other hand, it is a work which does not disavow its deep connections with a prior tradition involving Duchamp's last work, the ETANT DONNES, where the spectator views the tableau vivant through a peep-hole and becomes conscious of the libidinal economy implied in seeing and being seen. Viewing FIELD from outside the doorway which frames it seems a voyeuristic experience, at the first level; but it can also be experienced as the coming into being of a new type of relationship with the world of representation. It is as if the proscenium arch had been turned round, and we ourselves were on stage, confronted by a myriad of viewers. [8]

In a thoughtful essay on one of the presentations of FIELD, Thomas McEvilley used the evocative title, 'Seeds of the Future'. It is impossible, in effect, not to take account of the pervasive Utopian character of all of Antony Gormley's work, which is entirely consistent with his need to revise and reinterpret, rather than abjure, the great collective experiment of Modernism. Thinking of his development against the context of the Western tradition as a whole, I am reminded of the reiterated images of the Last Judgement which crowd the facades of so many European abbeys and cathedrals. Each represents a definitive demarcation, literally a 'judgement', between the bodies of the damned which descend to Hell and the glorified bodies which are gathered up into Paradise. In the same way, the bodies of Gormley's sculpture - the innumerable figurines of FIELD and SOUND II in its cathedral crypt - seem to be transfixed in waiting: not because they expect some imminent and irreversible decree, but as if their glorification depended uniquely on us.

NOTES

1. See Norman Bryson, VISION AND PAINTING - THE LOGIC OF THE GAZE, London, 1983, pp 6-35 ; the issue of the 'essential copy' is also discussed in my own study, THE TRUE VINE - ON VISUAL REPRESENTATION AND THE WESTERN TRADITION, Cambridge, 1989, p 27 ff.

2. Quoted in David Freedberg, THE POWER OF IMAGES: STUDIES IN THE HISTORY AND THEORY OF RESPONSE, London, 1989, p 77. Freedberg ranges widely over the many forms that have been customarily excluded from serious discussion by art historians, such as votive images, waxworks and erotica, in order to show how arbitrary a line has been drawn between 'aesthetic' and other forms of response .

3. A striking confirmation of Gormley's dialectical attitude to the formulations of Modernist orthodoxy can be found in the following observation. He writes: 'If late modernist painting conflated the figure and the ground in the interests of a single unequivocal surface, I propose that the body is the ground and that at the other side of appearance is a space far greater than the space against which, traditionally, the body is figured. If Caspar David Friedrich's MONK AND THE SEA is a Rothko with a man in it, I am trying to make a case for a man containing the boundless space of consciousness' (ANTONY GORMLEY, Contemporary Sculpture Center, Tokyo, 1992, unpaginated). Another way of putting this is to say that Modernism implied a diffusion of the figure in the field, whilst Gormley attempts to identify the field inside the figure. The 'sublime' dimension which a Northern Romantic painter like Friedrich displaces on to the landscape is relocated in consciousness. The artist's task is to organise the conditions under which that internal consciousness becomes accessible to perception.

4. This profound symmetry between the work of the artist and that of the thinker can often be masked by the fact that second-hand theories become diffused through our culture, and acquire the force of orthodoxy (what Roland Barthes would have called doxa) precisely at the time when their authors have largely abandoned them and turned in another direction. It is amusing to note that Umberto Eco's theory of the 'open work', which developed in the 1960s, has been used to justify a kind of post-modern eclecticism. Eco, however , has in recent years become preoccupied with defining the limits of interpretation, and with tracing broad patterns of historical continuity, as in his study of the search for the 'perfect language'. It goes without saying that Antony Gormley's strategy has more in common with Eco's recent work than with the earlier phase.

5. Hazlitt , COMPLETE WORKS, London, 1930-4, vol x, pp 10-11.

6. See Georges Didi-Huberman, LE CUBE ET LE VISAGE - AUTOUR D'UNE SCULPTURE D'ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, Paris, 1992, and CE QUE NOUS VOYONS, CE QUI NOUS REGARDE, Paris, 1992. Didi-Huberman notes that Rosalind Krauss was right to put the names of Rodin and Brancusi at the very centre of her study of minimalist sculpture; his discussion of the remarkable 'The Cube' by Giacometti proceeds from the assumption that its 'extreme formalism gave rise to the very question of the portrait, which was put from the basis of an absence, of a humanity by default' (CE QUE NOUS VOYONS, p 102).

7. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' in ART IN THEORY, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford, 1992, pp 822-33.

8. Gormley himself sees a precedent in Piero Manzoni's SOCLE DU MONDE for this work which consists in 'looking to the life that is looking at it'.