

ANTONY GORMLEY

MARGARET IVERSEN - STILL STANDING

From ANTONY GORMLEY: STILL STANDING, Fontanka in association with State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia, 2011

On the face of it, Antony Gormley's intervention in the State Hermitage Museum's gallery of classical statuary is a simple one: remove the statues from their plinths and raise the level of the floor so that they seem to stand on the floor rather than on their bases. At a stroke, Olympian gods and mythical heroes are brought down to earth. Although the gesture may be simple, its implications are many and far-reaching. We no longer gaze up in awe at the remote, idealised forms on their plinths or pedestals. Rather, they inhabit a space continuous with our own. Like fallen angels, they are now in our midst so we view them quite differently. We now see more clearly that they are material things made of stone, some pieced together from fragments. Once clothed in the subtle drapery of aesthetic distance, the semi-clad figures now look naked, exposed. Originally arranged around the periphery of the gallery, they are now free-standing statues spaced at intervals around the gallery, much like the living visitors. Also, their autonomy as discrete works of art is compromised, for now we walk between and around the figures which have become responsive to us and their neighbours. Gormley's playfulness is evident in some of his arrangements: for example, a diminutive Eros is positioned so that he looks with an oedipal mixture of fear and desire at a powerful Athena. Without their plinths, which set them apart like frames around paintings, the single figures coalesce to form a complex array that we must negotiate visually and physically. 'I'm interrogating the authority of a sculpture that pretends to be whole,' remarks Gormley, 'or, that pretends to be a point of absolute reference.' [1] In a word, Gormley's gesture turns a collection of individual ancient works of art into a contemporary installation. It also sheds light on his practice as a sculptor.

It is often argued that in the mid-1960s, the moment of Minimalism, the condition of sculpture radically changed. Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Robert Morris amongst others produced simple, manufactured, geometric forms which they disposed around the space of the gallery or landscape. As Morris observed, this new work took the relations out of the object and created new ones with architectural or natural surroundings and with the viewer. Yet 'viewer' hardly seems an adequate term for the changed role of the visitor who was now called on to move through the installation and gauge the scale of works against his or her own body. Rosalind Krauss called this new condition 'sculpture in the expanded field'. Alex Potts added that sculpture at this point became more like painting that had moved out into three dimensions, with the frame extended to encompass the room. [2] Gormley's work, although clearly different from Minimalism, must be understood in relation to this changed condition of sculpture as installation. In 1993 he observed that 'the frame of the room is not dissimilar to the frame of the canvas'. [3]

It is arguable that this fundamental change in the nature of sculptural practice has, in fact, been a gradual process that has been underway for the past couple of millennia. According to Hegel, sculpture attained its peak of perfection long ago in classical antiquity. Its subsequent demise as the leading edge of artistic development had to do with the particular conception of objectivity it embodied: 'The statue is predominantly independent on its own account, unconcerned about the spectator who can place himself wherever he likes.' [4] Hegel clearly had in mind something like the Venus de Milo, which might well be described as 'self-reposing, self-complete, objective'. [5] Elsewhere, this summit of beauty is described as 'reserved, unreceptive'. Even more bluntly, he declared: 'it leaves us moderns somewhat cold'. [6] Painting, for Hegel, implies a quite different sense of the mind's relation to its objects. Its representations are pure appearances that have no independent existence. Yet precisely because of this seeming insufficiency, the spectator is bound up with it all the more closely: 'The spectator is as it were in it from the beginning, is counted in with it.' [7] Here we might think of the implied subject of perspective, or of Rembrandt's trembling colours, his fleeting effects of light and shade, and also the way his depicted figures often return the spectator's gaze. If the statue is regarded as predominantly independent, complete in itself and unconcerned about the spectator, then painting, having a far less substantial, merely virtual existence, appeals to spectators by assuming or demanding their presence and sometimes even their imaginative participation. In short, painting involves, for Hegel, the recognition of the mind-constituted nature of our objectivity and it offers an occasion for reflecting on it. As Michael Podro makes clear, this recognition carries with it a sense of freedom, because 'for Hegel it was an essential part of that freedom for the mind to break out of its isolation, the isolation of pure thought confronting the alien world of matter'. It is in the nature of mind to feel constrained or oppressed 'unless it can reach out into the world, unless it can unite thought with the material world'. [8] Hegel's philosophy of art gives art an important role in the project of human liberation.

These observations on modern self-awareness and the sort of objects it finds satisfying bear closely on Gormley's intervention in the gallery of antique statuary at the Hermitage. The ideal, autonomous statues are made subject to the same contingencies of space, time and light as the visitor - they confront us in ways that demand our bodily and emotional engagement. Yet Hegel's remarks also have implications for understanding both Gormley's sculpture as a whole and, in particular, his recent work displayed in the adjoining room of the Hermitage Museum. STILL STANDING consists of a series of cast iron figures in the generalised shape and size of the artist. They appear to be constructed from blocks of various sizes but were in fact cast whole. The metal is rough and stained, giving them a rather forlorn character that is amplified by their somewhat hunched postures. The blocks translate the muscles and skeletal armature of the body into architectonic modules, thereby displaying more clearly the weights and counter-weights that keep us standing in an upright position. Yet none of the figures are strictly upright. STILL STANDING is the development of a series of works from another exhibition, ATAXIA II (2009), in which the position of each figure is based on an involuntary spasm that dislocates the body's centre of gravity (see, for example, HAFT II). The same is true of the new figures, but they are adumbrated with bigger, fewer and more tightly packed blocks, turning the body into a craggy caryatid. Although they might at first appear symmetrical, closer scrutiny reveals subtle displacements and shifts in the distribution of weight that are then compensated for elsewhere. For example, bent knees make the buttocks protrude, throwing the chest forward and the head back. A similar set of adjustments are made in the case of lateral shifts. Gormley describes these bodies as 'teetering about their own centre of gravity, and consciously coming dangerously close to falling'. But, he adds, 'the implication is that the falling isn't going to happen. Or the possibility is there but it's not going to happen because they are balanced towers.' [9]

Needless to say, these variations on forms of disequilibrium contrast with the graceful poses assumed by the classical statues in the adjoining gallery. The seventeen sculptures that make up STILL STANDING are a painstaking investigation into the human body's struggle to maintain verticality. Like walking, which is a controlled falling forward, standing is revealed here as a series of adjustments to a teetering tower of elements. Gormley is interested in the evolutionary implications of the vertical posture. These works, he says, involve 'the acknowledgement of the human animal having evolved from a horizontal to a vertical spine. The "stackedness" of the vertebrae is associated with the dialectic that we have taken as a basis of our moral and hierarchical code - that the animal nature of sex has to be at the opposite and lower end of the higher functions of what happens in the brain. This investigation of our verticality has the implication that it isn't as stable as we would like to think.' [10] The act of viewing the work involves reflecting on one's own unstable posture. What asymmetries characterise our stance? Is there a mood or emotion associated with each of them - a language of gesture? Through a psycho-physical form of empathic identification, we animate the cold iron.

Prior to this series, Gormley made a series of block figures that introduced space and light into the intervals between the blocks. These porous figures are clearly made to prompt the imaginative engagement of the viewer to complete the forms. The necessity of this activity is perhaps even more pronounced in a work like *QUANTUM CLOUD* (2000) in which a scintillating mirage or blur formed by a matrix of steel rods only condenses at the core into a human figure from certain viewing positions. We are drawn to these works in the same way that we are drawn to ruins, for they leave a space open for the viewer. As Gormley has said of his steel block figures: 'The sculptures depend on there being a tension between the clarity of the steel blocks and a sense of exposure at the edge of the work. Light and space seem to eat away at the embodied core.' [11]

Was this sense of exposure lacking in Gormley's earlier bodycases clad in lead? Certainly these figures have a more ambivalent relation to the space around them. On the one hand, they are casts of the naked body of the artist, so there is an obvious sense in which they involve exposure to the world. The casts are indexical traces, like photographs: three-dimensional impressions of a real body. On the other hand, Gormley has referred to these works as cases for the body, implying that there is also a feeling of containment or imprisonment in the layers of plaster, fibre glass and lead. The layers have the effect of generalising the figure and of making nuanced expressive gesture rather limited. Are they responsive second skins or very snug coffins? Perhaps their double charge of containment and exposure is the whole point. Lead is a lustreless, inert material that is associated with the melancholic temperament. [12] With the bodycases, Gormley tried to inform this substance with the trace of human consciousness in order to find a way out of the isolation and constraint he felt. This feeling of constraint is not just the general one of the mind's fraught relation to matter. In a particularly candid interview, Gormley remarked on the effects of an over-protective childhood, noting that his task in adulthood has been 'finding the other half of life that my upbringing excluded me from - which is an encounter with the earth, the body, the unconscious'. [13] However illuminating, this risks an over-personalised interpretation of works which are addressed to an audience and intended to make us reflect on our own fear of and desire for exposure.

The task of informing obdurate matter with spirit or mind is, according to Hegel, the task of the sculptor. Gormley accomplishes this in a very unusual way. The traditional sculptor either directly carves or moulds a malleable material like clay, making it conform to an idea. In the latter case the model is then used to form a mould which can then be cast in bronze or plaster, Gormley takes his own body as model, as found object, skips the sculpting stage and, with the help of assistants, has himself wrapped in clingfilm and scrim and smeared with plaster. [14] Rather than assuming the heroic mantle of the sculptor, Gormley positions himself inside the work-in-progress where he is helpless, blind and immobilised. It is a position comparable to being photographed, about which Barthes observed that he felt himself becoming an object as he experienced a 'micro-version of death'. [15]

The powerful emotional resonance of the lead-clad bodycasts are a result of the tension they sustain between the fear of exposure (to earth, body, unconscious and death) and a desire for exposure to these very same elements. An eloquent example of this tension can be seen in the 100 cast iron figures of *ANOTHER PLACE* (1997). The figures stand looking out to sea in the shallows along the coast of Merseyside, England. They are subject to time and tide, placed in a constantly changing environment, exposed and slowly corroding. They both resist and acknowledge entropy, or what Gormley refers to as 'the indifference of time and the universe'. [16]

The juxtaposition of classical statues and Gormley's figures in the Hermitage Museum reveals something else about his work. Classical statuary and the long tradition of sculpture it engendered took themes of action and the will as its main subject matter. The stillness of Gormley's figures has to do with the fact that his work does not form part of that tradition. Just as his sculptural technique renounces the typically hypertrophied agency of the sculptor at work, so also do his figures renounce purposive activity. Normally they stand or crouch or curl up in a foetal position; they do not engage in any functional action or strike any theatrical poses. The closest analogy to the disposition of the bodies is the intense concentration and stillness of a Buddha - eyes closed but in touch with every fibre of being. This aspect sets his work apart from other sculptors working with bodycasts such as Kiki Smith or Robert Gober, both of whom are interested in the feeling of the abject provoked by the thin boundary between self and not-self. [17] Gormley remarks that he is intent on 'the voiding of the subject, of gesture, of drama' in order 'to provide a context for just being'. The reason for this, he says, is that he is trying 'to make the work a kind of flat surface, like a plinth or a platform for the viewer's experience'. [18]

The mood of many of Gormley's figures could be described as 'philosophical', but there are some that have a rather different character. These other figures engage in no purposive or controlled activity because they are in the grip of some internal impulse or external coercion. According to an artist's statement, *TESTING A WORLD VIEW* (1993), a set of five fairly crude cast iron bodies sitting bolt upright and placed around the room in various positions, reveals far more than the phenomenology of bodies in space. For Gormley, their different orientations move from 'evocations of hysteria, head-banging, catatonia, to the awakened dead and the about-to-be-beheaded'. [19] It is partly because the bodies are not placed in the position in which they were cast that makes them seem the victims of inner or outer coercion. For Gormley, succumbing to gravity, they become thing-like: 'I was always interested in what happens when you accept the objectness or the thingness of a sculpture and put it into the world of things, without the protection of the base. What does it still do? What is it still telling us?' [20] This strategy was used to great effect in a site-specific installation made for an abandoned tram storage station, the Remise, in Vienna. *CRITICAL MASS II* (1995) consists of five casts of twelve different body positions - 60 figures in all. Gormley made this piece as 'an anti-monument evoking the victims of the twentieth century'. In the original installation, only eleven of the bodies were displayed in the same orientation as they were cast. The rest were 'tumbled, literally dumped from the back of a truck'. [21] Inevitably, this piece evoked the fate of Jews and other victims of the Holocaust in the extremity of their exposure. [22] Gormley imagined or hoped for a high degree of spectator involvement: 'With *CRITICAL MASS*, I thought that there was an invitation for the viewer to sort of roll them around in his head. When he or she saw this field of fallen bodies, they became raw material for the imaginative re-positioning. Certainly implied in them is a sort of ascent because the twelve body positions are such that you could see a progression from the most foetal to the most alert.' [23]

The participation of the viewer has played an increasingly important role in Gormley's practice. It began in a moment of crisis when he decided to break out of his lead-clad figures. He first accomplished this in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the collaborative project *FIELD*, where he further renounced the agency of the sculptor by organising hundreds of people to make small clay figures. Since then he has made other collaborative works. *DOMAIN FIELD* (2003) involved making casts of local volunteers' bodies as a preliminary to an exhibition at the *BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art*, Gateshead. For *ONE & OTHER* (2009), he arranged for members of the public to spend an hour alone and exposed for all to see on the empty fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. In each of these cases, the barrier between maker and viewer is undermined.

The narrative I have described of Gormley's career to date begins with his effort to overcome constraint and isolation through the bodycases. This is followed by a remarkable opening out in terms of both formal means and collaborative procedures. The porous figures of steel rods seen in his more recent work transform the human being into a delicate matrix or field of energy. In keeping with the discoveries of quantum mechanics, they seem to call into question the very existence of solid matter. They further suggest the restless flux of digitalised bits of information and the geometric pixilation of the image. What is the role of the sculptor in a situation where matter, far from being seen as obdurate, is totally volatised? Gormley would now seem to be posing one of the most important issues of our time concerning the possibility of personal identity in the total information world. Returning to the Hermitage Museum's gallery of solid antique statues may prompt us to reflect on what is becoming of us and our world.

Gormley is interested in conceiving of the body as fugitive - as a constellation rather than a thing. He notes that 'the materialised pixel was very much in my mind at the beginning of the block work series'. [24] He sees the necessity of acknowledging these forms of dematerialisation and, at the same time, resisting them with elemental materials and the standing human figure:

'I am aware that sculpture has always tried to defy death, and it is thereby bound up with a sense of our own mortality. But behind all of that is a much bigger issue, which is really the extinction of the human project. And I know that's very easy to say and portentous, but I do think that sculpture, of its nature, has to enquire or try to make a difference. If we take the standing stone as the sort of 'Ur-sculpture', which I think it is, it is the ultimate witness of time and space and an attempt to mark the surfaces of the world with some indicator of the conscious mind. Most of us now live in a made world, rather than an inherited earthly one, and you have to ask at what cost. The withdrawal into the meta-environment of material culture and into the meta-languages of the digital and other communication tools means that we have shelved our animal nature. My project is a meditation on that, even though I don't have any answers.' [25]

The figures of STILL STANDING are like ancient standing stones that have become weathered and broken but still bear witness to the continuity and vulnerability of human life on earth.

NOTES

1. Remark made by Gormley during a conversation between the artist and the author at the artist's studio, London, 11 April 2011. Hereafter referred to as 'Conversation, 11 April'.
2. Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', OCTOBER, No. 8 (Spring 1979). Reprinted in Krauss, THE ORIGINALITY OF THE AVANT-GARDE AND OTHER MODERNIST MYTHS (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987). Alex Potts, THE SCULPTURAL IMAGINATION: FIGURATIVE, MODERNIST, MINIMALIST (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 3.
3. Interview with Declan McGonagle in ANTONY GORMLEY, ed. Judith Nesbitt (London: Tate Gallery, 1993), p.45.
4. G.W.F. Hegel, AESTHETICS: LECTURES ON FINE ART, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vol. 2, p. 806.
5. Ibid., p. 806.
6. Ibid., p. 523.
7. Ibid., p.806.
8. Michael Podro, THE CRITICAL HISTORIANS OF ART (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 19.
9. Conversation, 11 April.
10. Ibid.
11. Antony Gormley, ed. Michael Mack (Gottingen: Steidl, 2007), p.447.
12. The German artist, Anselm Kiefer, made a fighter jet of lead called MELANCHOLIA (1990 - 91), referring to the winged creature in Albrecht Durer's MELANCOLIA I and to the aftermath of war. See Gormley's earlier VEHICLE (1987), a plane-shaped form clad in lead. For illustrations of this and other works, see the artist's website www.antonygormley.com.
13. Interview with Declan McGonagle, op. cit., p. 45.
14. The artist is moulded after being wrapped in a thin layer of cling film, and the resulting mould is used to cast a positive and scanned to produce a 30,000-coordinate topographical map of the surface of his body. This is a fully rotational file that is unloaded onto a Rhino programme, providing a bounding volume that is interpreted in blocks that run in consistent horizontal and vertical axes, producing a weave that alternates mass and void. The dimensions of the blocks are then taken from the digital design and cut in polystyrene and assembled within a measurement frame. The proportional relations are constant but can be made at any size, from miniature to architectural. The first of these architectural-sized block works was HABITAT, made in 2010 in Anchorage, Alaska.
15. See Roland Barthes, CAMERA LUCIDA: REFLECTIONS ON PHOTOGRAPHY, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), p. 14.
16. Antony Gormley, MAKING SPACE (Gateshead: BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, 2003), p. 139.
17. In its persistent exploration of figuration and the body during periods of their near exclusion in sculpture, Bruce Nauman's work offers an interesting parallel to Gormley's. In 1966, Nauman made two 'bodycase' pieces: STORAGE CAPSULE FOR THE RIGHT REAR QUARTER OF MY BODY and a study for a sculpture, STORAGE CAPSULE FOR HENRY MOORE.
18. ANTONY GORMLEY: BLIND LIGHT (London: Hayward Gallery, 2007), p. 59.
19. ANTONY GORMLEY, ed. Michael Mack, op. cit., p. 115.
20. Conversation, 11 April.
21. ANTONY GORMLEY, ed. Michael Mack, op. cit., p. 181. See also Gormley's remarks about this piece on his website.
22. The site-specific work, LEARNING TO THINK (1991), installed in the Old Jail House in Charleston, USA, is also relevant in this context. Five headless bodies are suspended from the ceiling, evoking the history of slavery and lynching in the Southern states of America.
23. Conversation, 11 April.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.
