

ANTONY GORMLEY

DARIAN LEADER - DRAWING ON SPACE

From ANTONY GORMLEY, exh. cat., BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, 2003, Published by Hand Books, London

Antony Gormley's new project at BALTIC could hardly create a greater contrast with his permanent and familiar intervention in the local environment, the ANGEL OF THE NORTH, situated just four miles away at Team Valley Colliery. Where the massive, monumental ANGEL appears dense and heavy, the 290 DOMAIN sculptures seem light, ethereal and almost weightless. Where the ANGEL appears earthbound, constrained from the flight its wings invite, the DOMAIN pieces seem just about to defy gravity, some of them almost floating, hovering in a vast thicket of shorn steel and light.

Where the ANGEL presents us with a single, monolithic body, the DOMAIN FIELD displays the body in its multiplicity. These are many bodies and not one, not the body of the artist but those of local inhabitants for the most part, the same people who see the ANGEL and confront its strange, unearthly presence every day. If many of them have spoken of recognising aspects of themselves in the ANGEL, it is now a question for them of finding themselves in figures which seem so different, yet are so much closer, in one sense, to their own, unique body form.

Many of the participants in the BALTIC project have described the impact the ANGEL has had on their lives, an impetus for them to volunteer to be cast for DOMAIN FIELD. For one, it urged him to question the stasis of his existence, for another it gave her a new sense of belonging to a community. The daily train journey to and from work, said one participant, was always made special by the presence of this huge, splayed figure: it was like a talisman, she said, a good luck sign that allowed her to feel settled each time she saw it. If with the ANGEL, a work has become part of people's lives, now with the DOMAIN pieces their lives become a part of the work.

The making of DOMAIN FIELD, as Gormley has often said, is just as much a part of the work as the finished product. Participants had the opportunity to become part of a collective project, involving the delicate process of being cast and then engaging with the resultant figure s. Wrapped in cling film, covered in plaster and then cut out of their encasing shells, they would have to endure, not only extremes of temperature change as the plaster set, but also the brief period of sensory deprivation this entailed. Once the casts were complete, each would be assigned to a welder who would then work from the empty space left by the body to construct a matrix of steel bars. As one of the welders put it, this part of the work "was like climbing inside someone".

The DOMAIN pieces reflect and tease, they are sparing and stripped and imbued with movement. If we have no difficulty in discerning the form of the human body, the characteristic features of continuity and enclosure that we associate with the sculpted body are nonetheless absent. Gormley encouraged the welders to avoid following the skeletal frame, and instead we find a matrix of lines, joined at mostly irregular angles, creating a play of light and line that privileges energy and process over boundary and surface. The play of light is echoed in the gentle movement of the sculptures, and the fact that the different parts of the body vibrate at slightly different speeds gives them a resolutely animate quality. Although they break with the conventional realism of having clearly defined boundaries, they seem more real, more human, than classically drafted figures. Their gentle movement interpellates us. They are asking us questions. As Gormley says of these sculptures: "What exactly are they waiting for?"

Gormley's earlier work involving the human body was based exclusively on moulds of himself. The turning point came when he embarked on the spectacular FIELD pieces, where groups of local inhabitants would be invited to mould tens of thousands of clay figures, to form strange, created collectivities. These well-known installations invert the usual conditions of viewing works of art: it is less us who look at the figures than the figures who look at us. The carefully defined viewing position confronts us with our inability to take in the whole work, and it becomes impossible to encompass the totality of the figures or 'take everything in': all our eyes can do is to circulate within it. Gormley saw these clay FIELD pieces as "transitional objects", establishing a space in which both the moment and the process of making could be shared.'

The challenge posed by the FIELD pieces to the traditional conditions of artistic display is continued in the BALTIC project. Rather than isolating the work in a single gallery space as a 'finished product' with the production process obscured, DOMAIN FIELD involved and visibly documented the active participation of hundreds of local inhabitants. Many participants compared the improvised casting studio at BALTIC to a factory, but one which produced, not a universal product, but a particular one, unique to each subject. Art is linked here with the community rather than with an elite: not with collectors, but with collectivity.

This focus on participation in the process of production gives a particular twist to Gormley's project: it cannot be separated in any sense from the work itself. If we collect together the many comments made by the participants on their experiences of being cast, we find the very same effects ascribed to the encounter with the finished figures! The feeling of bodily disorientation, for example, during the casting process is echoed in the feeling of disorientation produced by the DOMAIN itself. Similarly, the strange accentuation of silence involved in the process of the head cast, followed by the rush of sound when the cast is removed, introduces a weight of silence which we experience again in the silence of the figures. As one participant put it, "the experience of casting gave me a fresh perspective on my body. On how I carry it, which parts take the burden of my weight, on the shape of it, the boundaries of it, and where I begin and end". When participants describe their experience of the DOMAIN FIELD, it is exactly this repertoire of sensations that they draw upon.

These resonances between work and process are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the theme of belonging, evoked again and again by DOMAIN's participants. Asked why they wished to take part in the project, the most frequent response of the volunteers was that they wanted to belong. They wanted to be part of something, part of a larger project. This is a motif which converges curiously with Gormley's own preoccupations: his sense, from an early age, of never quite belonging, of feeling apart. Much of his work, he explains, has been an attempt to "objectify his otherness", and "then make a tribe or family of others made of selves that have a place". This questioning of one's place in the world leads Gormley to ask "Where do we belong?", and perhaps the DOMAIN work is one way of elaborating this problem of one's identity in relation to others.

The FIELD works in general certainly create groups, but as Gormley points out, they "don't represent them": rather than recording groups, they are instrumental in constituting them. We might choose to see the creation of a group as a response to the sense of not belonging to one, and yet it is far from clear that Gormley's collectivities are groups. As Clive Turnbull pointed out while discussing one of Gormley's installations, the figures are together, but they are not a group.' They are not identified by a uniform trait which would make them the same, but exist as a set of differences. And

this is one of the things that human beings have the greatest difficulty in understanding: not simply that other people might be different from oneself, but, crucially, that they are different from each other. The big breakthrough in the relation of men to women was supposed to have been when they finally registered the fact that if they were from Mars, women were from Venus, but this simply perpetuated the error of confusing collectivities with groups, It's not that men are from Mars and women from Venus, since women are from Venus, Neptune, Pluto, Saturn... That is, not just different from men, but different from each other.

Being different, of course, doesn't stop people from wanting to be the same. The same as other people, for example. But being a part of and being the same as are not exactly equivalents. Sometimes, the only solution to the impossibility of possessing another person is to make oneself belong to them. If they can't belong to you, you can make yourself a part of them, This logic of belonging often obscures the more basic problem of how we belong to ourselves, a question that emerged in the production process for DOMAIN FIELD with some frequency. Time and time again, participants would request their discarded body moulds, as if the mould, as one person put it, "was a part of myself".

One is reminded here of the Aristophanic myth in Plato's Symposium according to which the world's first inhabitants were spherical, subsequently rent in two by the gods as punishment for their divine aspirations. Each part would then spend the rest of its life trying to re-find its other, lost half. If we leave aside the jokey flavour of the original story, intended as a pastiche of the human tendency to invent myths, what does this tell us about the body and the way we inhabit it? In Gormley's many double figure works, like GROWTH (1987) or FOLD (1988), we see two bodies so close as to be one but never quite getting there. And in the artist's notebooks, we often see the preliminary sketches for single figure works featuring not one, but two bodies, joined obliquely or striving to identify. These sculptures suggest that the body we inhabit is defined in a sense by the very effort to join another body, even if this lost part is entirely unseen.

These concerns are central to Gormley's work, who has said that what he aims at is less representation of the body than the space left by the body, from the imprint of a human figure in BED(1980-1) to the use of lead body cases over several years, sealing an empty space in their interior. These works emphasised the relation of body to void, the idea of "a space in which a body had once been". The empty space defined by the ribbons of fabric that had once been the artist's clothes in ROOM (1981) could become the hollow core of the lead figures. This exploration of the body as a place rather than as an object would change direction when Gormley moved from empty lead cases to solid body forms.

Gormley sees LOST SUBJECT as the pivotal piece that ended the lead case series, the figure no longer symmetrical or divided so rigorously by vertical and horizontal seams. In contrast to the earlier body cases, this work was far more detailed and made Gormley realise that he could now tackle the "other side" of the body's boundary and actually construct the space where the body had been. "It broke all the rules I'd worked with until then", he says, and "I realised that I couldn't go any further with the presence-absence motif". The contained space was now filled, to give the solid massy figures of the body form series.

In the late nineties, these body forms would metamorphose into the startling INSIDER figures, which involved a reduction of the contours and volume of the body to a compressed, charred core. The body, as Gormley says, becomes "severely contracted" with these works, which evoke less the void and emptiness of the body casts than the irreducible residue of the body, its existence as embodied pain. After the INSIDERS, just as at the end of the lead cast series, Gormley realised that "there was nowhere else to go", Nowhere, in fact, but out. And he understood suddenly that he could make an Insider that expanded, as it were, to the original parameters of the body zone. Compression became expansion: "We went from synthetic compression to a kind of explosion". [4]

The works which followed involve an expansion of the body, not in the literal sense of scale but in terms of the development of an explosive, relational matrix, Whereas in the hermetic works, there's always a zone that can't be seen, the DOMAIN sculptures hide nothing. Both the empty volumes of the body casts and the massy presence of the body forms, have dissolved into the scrambles and unspooled bodies of the QUANTUM CLOUDS and the DOMAIN FIELD. The whole question of the volume of the body seems to have been redrafted, Gormley had said that "the perfect form of sculpture is a bomb", and now, in the DOMAIN and QUANTUM CLOUD pieces, it is a question of exactly this explosion of the figure.

What has happened, then, to the form of the human body in these pieces? Gormley's early work, as we've seen, explores the spaces occupied by the body, and it does this in particular through the charting of its boundary zones: its edges. But if an edge is supposed to tell us where a body ends and something else begins, it does this with ambiguity. When Leonardo admonished contemporary artists with the statement, "the boundaries of the body are the least of all things", he added that, like the truth of this is proven by the fact that the boundary of a substance is a surface which is neither part of the body contained within that surface nor part of the air surrounding that body". An edge, as such, is thus no simple matter.

Edges and boundaries are what we search for repeatedly in the visual field. Even looking at landscapes or scenes that contain no image of the human body, we still seek out the closed curves and continuous boundaries with which we like to enclose it. Many people indulge in the everyday activity, which at times takes on the power of compulsion, of tracing lines mentally around the form of some object, be it a piece of furniture or another person's face. These tracings are a way of making enclosures, and hence count, perhaps, as a style of defence. We look for enclosure, a space bounded by unbroken lines.

In his art, Gormley speaks of his fascination with "negotiating and renegotiating the edge, in terms of whether it's within or without". Edges, he says, are "the relation between something and nothing", and they "both define and release us". And certainly in Gormley's earlier work, the edge is what defines the outline of the form of the human body. But with the DOMAIN pieces, although we have plenty of lines, we have no continuous edges, no closed curve or contour. Although we can recognise a body, these comforting and defining features seem displaced.

The EXPANSION pieces occupy a special place here in Gormley's work. Rather than simply adding further layers of plaster to the initial body mould, regular lengths of wood are attached to nodal points on the mould's surface, and the resultant framework is then covered to produce a continuous surface. Starting from the body, this formal procedure creates cocoon-like organic forms that seem quite distant from the body image and yet are powerfully evocative of the experience of its mass and presence. These works involve an exploration of the transitional space between the body form pieces and the liberated space of the DOMAIN sculptures. Their construction, after all, relies on the creation of both an empty space, between the form of the body and its containing shell, and the spiky network of wood that gravitates outward from the body.

Gormley's study of the function of edges allows us to think about how we use lines and boundaries. When we draw a figure bounded by a continuous line, we both create and enclose a surface. But often, once the enclosure is complete, we trace the bounding line again and again. If an edge, as Gormley says, is the "relation between something and nothing", doesn't this mean that the stakes of enclosure are really quite high? And that the bounding lines become repeated, not just to define but to reinforce the limits of the body? Bearing this in mind, we could see works like FLOOR

(1981) and EXERCISE BETWEEN BLOOD AND EARTH (1979- 1981) as not so much recordings of natural processes, reminiscent of the concentric lines of the lateral section of a tree trunk, than as the creation and reinforcement of limits, in exactly the way we see in the drawing on page 12. Although we are certainly tempted to think of a tree, as Gormley says, his concern is not representation or mimesis but the experience of the body.' And hence the key becomes less the concentric lines of a tree than the iterated lines of a drawing to make a boundary and reinforce one.

One of the implications of this perspective is that the body is not something natural, a given which we can then represent, but rather something that has to be constructed. And just as we see in concentric works like FLOOR, so in the DOMAIN pieces it has to be built up with lines. The difference is that if in the earlier work, these lines are used to enclose and contain, in the DOMAIN sculptures they constitute the body without bounding it. They are neither continuous nor iterated in any concentric way. And indeed, the more we focus on these configurations of line in space, the more we have a sense of a drawing that has left its two-dimensional dwelling to inhabit the very space that we do.

The DOMAIN works, as Gormley says, are "a kind of drawing in space". Although they are clearly three-dimensional, they still can't quite help evoking the two-dimensional surfaces which we associate with drawing, and in this quiet oscillation they collapse the classical distinction between drawing and sculpture. A body has been built up using lines as its constituents, hatched just as in the practice of drawing, creating and dispersing volumes with nothing more than the steel rods which always point to their own density as lines, that is, symbolic elements which allow artificial construction. And yet, in contrast to many of Gormley's notebook drawings, lines are there, less to reinforce and create limits and boundaries, than to bring out the network of relations constitutive of a body.

This movement from the concentric body drawings to the DOMAIN works recapitulates a similar movement from the lead casings to the solid body forms: what is initially used to define and enclose a boundary, then becomes a colonisation of the previously contained space. The resultant sculpture seems to appeal to a rather different notion of embodiment, less the classical Western bounded and enclosed figure, than the Eastern idea of the body as involving a set of relations with the surrounding world. Even in anatomical textbooks, the disparities are such that where Greek and then Renaissance works privileged the body's musculature, the Chinese rendering of the body had hardly any interest in or even depiction of muscle." The Chinese division of the body into pressure points is also alien to most orthodox Western medical schemas of the body, even though it has some points of convergence with the map of the body used in the old practice of bloodletting. The DOMAIN works privilege a set of points of convergence over the traditional enclosing, bounding surface, and hence may be compared, as Gormley says, "to a kind of acupuncture". The skin has become "a constellation" rather than a continuous, unbroken surface.

The question of boundaries and the evocation of the Eastern idea of a continuity of the human body with the surrounding world, introduces another motif which is central to Gormley's project: the relation of the human body to the natural, or more specifically, mineral world. A work like LAND, SEA AND AIR (1977-9) encases these three 'elements' in lead: we are unable to see their contents, yet meditate on their relations and their permanence. Whereas a sculptor like Rodin approached this problem of our relation to the mineral dimension through an emphasis on the emergence of the sculpted work from stone as such, often making the transition entirely visible, a work like LAND, SEA AND AIR uses opaque enclosure to invite the viewer to consider the relations at play mentally. And if one of Rodin's main interests was how the artificial can be born from the natural, Gormley's focus is perhaps more on how the artificial will return to the natural. Cycle and process are paramount.

The artist has often spoken of his interest in these themes, and the body's contact with "the changing life of the earth". As he says, "Our bodies are on temporary loan from the circulation of elements in the atmosphere". [9] And these questions are explored in a number of ways. Many of Gormley's lead works and installations like the one at Cuxhaven, where 100 figures are placed at intervals stretching out to sea, suggest how the human body is on loan: the movement of the tides reveals and conceals some of the figures, just as it evokes their eventual dissolution and transformation into sea and silt. If these works evoke borrowed time, the DOMAIN and QUANTUM pieces gravitate towards the theme of circulation, with the body participating in a field which includes the surrounding space itself.

When we see iron filings suddenly regiment themselves in formation when exposed to magnetism, we realise that the force field is there, even if it is only the filings that allow us to see it. The DOMAIN figures, like the filings, materialise a field, but without telling us which one: they open up all the possibilities of imagining, not only the fields we know about, like sound or magnetism, but also those we don't. These works tempt us, then, to see the body as in a certain continuity with the surrounding world, and we might even suspect that we are being led to some sort of panpsychism. The problem here is that the enhancement of line that the DOMAIN figures involve keeps taking us back to drawing: in other words, the artificial, human dimension of inscribing marks in space. It is perhaps this tension between the notion of a field linking the body and the world and that of the semiotic quality of drawing, that prevents us from equating the figures with matter as such.

It is human, symbolic activity, after all, that makes 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' an impossibility, precisely because of the introduction of memorials, markers and memory. Sculpture, from its classical inception, is often understood as the privileged artefact of this form of inscribed memory or evocation. The most radical doctrines of a continuity with nature, like that of the Marquis de Sade, continue to shock through their rejection of this dimension. De Sade's proposal for his own burial proved infinitely more unpalatable to his commentators than his many descriptions of unlicensed copulation: that his body be left with no tombstone in an unknown location, with all traces of his existence erased, to become pure matter. Don't we find a testimony to the impossibility of this continuity with nature in Gormley's stone circle at the British Library, where we witness the desperate and impossible effort of the human figure to return to the stone from which it has been cut?

Gormley's work explores a spectrum here: at one end, the impossible continuity of the body with nature, at the other, the impossible continuity of the body with culture. If the British Library circle illustrates the first impasse, works like TESTING A WORLD VIEW (1993), in which bodies pose at painful right angles to approximate the artificial space in which they are contained, illustrates the second. The body's constriction by symbolic space is given an even more devastating treatment in Gormley's ALLOTMENT installations, where instead of the body image, we are presented with serial concrete bunkers, each one tailored to the minimal space for a particular human body. Numbering these cells shows, Gormley says, "the way identity is translated into social administration", the symbolic forces imposed on the body that can nonetheless never entirely subsume it." The DOMAIN pieces seem, on an immediate level, to be moving in another direction. Rather than the constrained, controlled space of the ALLOTMENT bunkers, we find the body in its expansion, unbounded and unchecked, free of mass and weight. The contrast with the earlier lead casts and body forms suggests a "dematerialisation", and yet the concern with the question of embodiment has not changed. If the ALLOTMENT pieces evoke the body's forced immersion in the symbolic, world, the DOMAIN works are still exploring the same problem, but from another, strictly contemporary angle. Where the ALLOTMENT pieces respond to the position of the modern subject, an effect of the indignities of capitalism (loss of

identity, bureaucratisation, industrialised housing, and so on), the DOMAIN works engage with the experience of embodiment for the contemporary subject, dispersed increasingly in the networks of virtual space and computerisation.

Sculpture, as Gormley says, is the re to remind us that we're embodied, It "returns us to ourselves as physical beings". The more the contemporary subject becomes distributed in the virtual world, the more urgent becomes the question of its anchoring in the body. The more we exist in virtual space, the less there is to link us to our bodies. And the less there is to link us to our bodies, the body becomes not something we have, but something we make. We witness this on an everyday level in the obsession with gym visits or the popularity of body piercings. These practices respond to the progressive disembodiment introduced by technologies. The body becomes unravelled, like the fabric ribbons of Gormley's ROOM, and perhaps this unravelling or dispersion is materialised in the DOMAIN figures, the particular fragmentation of their bodies evoking the networks of technology and the new forms of relational field introduced by the virtual universe. Moving through the DOMAIN FIELD at BALTIC might give us a sense of exactly this virtual universe. Like entering another, strictly contemporary angle. Where the ALLOTMENT pieces respond to the position of the modern subject, an effect of the indignities of capitalism (loss of identity, bureaucratisation, industrialised housing, and so on), the DOMAIN works engage with the experience of embodiment for the contemporary subject, dispersed increasingly in the networks of virtual space and computerisation. Sculpture, as Gormley says, is to remind us that we're embodied, It "returns us to ourselves as physical beings". The more the contemporary subject becomes distributed in the virtual world, the more urgent becomes the question of its anchoring in the body. The more we exist in virtual space, the less there is to link us to our bodies. And the less there is to link us to our bodies, the body becomes not something we have, but something we make. We witness this on an everyday level in the obsession with gym visits or the popularity of body piercings. These practices respond to the progressive disembodiment introduced by technologies. The body becomes unravelled, like the fabric ribbons of Gormley's ROOM, and perhaps this unravelling or dispersion is materialised in the Domain figures, the particular fragmentation of their bodies evoking the networks of technology and the new forms of relational field introduced by the virtual universe.

Moving through the DOMAIN FIELD at BALTIC might give us a sense of exactly this virtual universe. Like entering the closed corridors of a computer game, we have to constantly negotiate our own position and movement. But the FIELD in fact establishes a very different experience: it is not about our presence in a representational or virtual field, but, on the contrary, a very real one. We move through it with the body, disoriented, surprised, persuaded by our encounter with the figures to question how we should react, what decorum these strange bodies require of us. As the artist says, they are "an invitation to lose and find ourselves". And, of course, the introduction to a new idea of nudity,

NOTES

1 'Antony Gormley, A Conversation with Klaus Theweleit and Monika -Theweleit-Kubale', ed. Hans-Werner Schmidt, SchleswigHolsteinischer Kunstverein, 1999, p. 45.

2 Ibid. p.5 1.

3 The Green Book, 3, p. 25.

4 Interview, 'Sculptura Internazionale a La Mandria', Torino, 2002, p. 8.

5 'The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci', Vol 2, London, Cape, 1956, p.267.

6 'Antony Gormley, Quantum Clouds and Other Works', Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Paris, 2000, p.59.

7 'Antony Gormley', London, Phaidon, Second ed, 2000, p.10.

8 Shigehisa Kuriyama, 'The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine', New York, Zone Books, 1999 .

9 'Sculptura Internazionale a La Mandria', op.cit. p. 3.

10 'Antony Gormley', Phaidon, op.cit. p. 151.

11 'Some of the Facts', Tale SI Ives, 2001, p. 176 and p.168.
