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BLACK HOLES AND EXPERIENCE

Antony Gormley's major installation EVENT HORIZON has been set up in Hong Kong thanks to the concerted efforts of the British Council and a number of corporate groups, together with the support of the SAR government. Other cities have hosted the art event before: London initially in 2007, and then Rotterdam and New York, followed by São Paolo and Rio de Janeiro; Hong Kong is the latest stop. In all these cities, the installation follows a similar format: 31 identical life size figures-27 made of fiberglass and 4 of solid cast iron, all cast from Gormley's own body-are positioned in various parts of the city, with the fiberglass figures perched eerily on the edge of rooftops in high-rise buildings and the cast iron figures on ground level interacting with pedestrian traffic. Each sculpture is unique and subtly different- made from 17 different moulds, each alert and upright but with a greater or lesser degree of internal tension. Although the various iterations of EVENT HORIZON use the same group of figures, the fact that they are placed in relation to different cityscapes should make one installation quite different from another.

However, to put too much stress on difference would be misleading, because there is one crucial aspect in which all the installations are indeed the same. They are the same not because they use the same 31 figures, but because they ask the same difficult but urgent question again and again: how can we experience at firsthand the space around us at a moment when space itself is changing so radically? In the installation, this question can take the form of a number of more specific projects: How do we experience space in relation to sculpture? Or architecture? Or the city? Nonetheless, underlying all these specific endeavors is the question about the problematic relation between space and experience hinted at in the title of the installation. EVENT HORIZON refers to the strange physics of black holes. When a star expands beyond a certain critical point, it collapses inward or implodes on itself. The result is a compacted dense mass with a gravitational pull so great that not even light can escape its force field. Hence, it cannot be seen; it becomes a black hole. The black hole to which the title of the installation refers is in the first place an emblem for the difficult-to-discern nature of experience today: not only our experience of outer space but also our experience of the space of the city. For in a sense that is more than merely metaphorical, cities today too are like black holes. Cities have become so dense and complex that they are now-as in the title of Calvino's great novel-'invisible cities'.

Nevertheless, there is another aspect of black holes equally relevant to the question of experience. Even though black holes can never be directly seen or experienced, we 'see' them in a manner of speaking through the effects they produce. At the edge of the black hole or event horizon, strange anomalous things happen; for example, light gets 'red-shifted', and time seems to slow to a crawl. Similarly, in Georg Simmel's seminal essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903), it is the anomalies of 'mental life', the changes in affective life and the often-bizarre experiences that its inhabitants undergo, which allow us to 'see' a metropolis that would otherwise remain indiscernible. But it is the global or informational cities of today-like the cities where EVENT HORIZON has been installed-that present the most insidious challenge to experience. This is not because such cities are harder to see but because they are all too easy to see: they are not invisible but hypervisible. However, what hypervisibility offers is not experience so much as substitutes for experience. Spectacle, information, and 'big data' promise to make the world appear to us with high definitional concreteness and accuracy; while in reality, they only make the world 'dis-appear'. Ironically, the more technologically advanced contemporary life is, the more substitutes are available, and the more acute the problem of experience and its disappearance becomes. The task becomes not just to see what is hard to see, but to see otherwise what is too easy to see.

Gormley's work is necessarily situated in this contemporary juncture, but challenges it on all fronts: formally, theoretically, and ideologically. It is work that is untimely, in the Nietzschean sense. One of its most remarkable aspects is that it neither abandons the possibility of experience nor celebrates it unreflexively. Gormley's insistence on art as the recovery of experience is not a retreat into more comfortable or old-fashioned modes of thinking; it comes not from what Baudrillard calls 'nostalgia for the real', or from a naive belief that experience is easily accessible. Rather it is work that tracks experience at the moment of its disappearance, which not coincidentally is also the moment, the 'event horizon', when experience and art are both being transfigured in unprecedented ways. Hence Gormley's is not so much an affirmative art as an art that emerges on the far side of negativity. We might describe it as an art of disappearance that is theoretically advanced and formally innovative, but that nevertheless puts its wager on finding antidotes in the spaces of sculpture, architecture, and the city to the crisis of experience.

STILLNESS AND SENSATION

Consider to begin with the stillness that is so characteristic of Gormley's sculptures. How can stillness in sculpture be a way of recovering experience? For example, the 31 figures of EVENT HORIZON just stand still on the rooftops and streets of the man-made environment of the city. Similarly, in HORIZON FIELD (2010-12), 100 figures are placed in the natural environment of the snow-clad Swiss Alps, staring straight ahead, seemingly oblivious of the skiers that whiz past them. In ANOTHER PLACE (1997), yet another 100 immobile figures find themselves in the coastal region of the Wattenmeer in Cuxhaven, Germany. The figures appear above the water and disappear beneath it as the tides recede and swell. These still figures from different installations all seem to exemplify perfectly Deleuze and Guattari's paradoxical description of the nomad as 'he who does not move'. While the migrant moves to some place else, the nomad does not move, even as the world moves around him.

Obviously, not all great sculpture aspires to stillness. In the Western tradition, during the baroque period and reaching a high point in Rodin, sculpture put the emphasis on animating objects and bodies, of capturing them in motion and creating the effect of dynamism even at the cost of torturing and fragmenting the object. While Gormley is a great admirer of Rodin (what sculptor can fail to be?), his own work follows a different trajectory, modeling itself he tells us after Jain, Hindu, and Buddhist sculpture. Such sculpture emphasized breath, stillness, and potential movement (recalling the paradoxical immobility of nomadism) rather than the breathless representation of actual movement. However, what is at stake is not the relative merit of different sculptural traditions 'East' or 'West', which is a frivolous debate. The real issue is how at the present moment experience is most readily available in sensationalized or banal form, especially when transmitted and processed by the media. In this context, stillness (which is not sensational) serves as a salutary interruption of the banalization of experience.

It is also worth noting that the stillness of Gormley's sculpture is not merely an attempt to slow down the world, but to be mindful of it. A figure who did

try to slow down the pace of life is the nineteenth century flâneur described by Walter Benjamin. One of his pastimes was to take turtles for a walk. However, compare this flâneur to the figure introduced by Malaysian-born,Taiwan-based filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang in his short film 'Walker' (2012), set like EVENT HORIZON in Hong Kong. The film is shot in a series of long takes, each showing a red-robed monk walking across different locations in Hong Kong, but walking so slowly as to seem almost immobile, like a Gormley sculpture. Tsai's walker is not a flâneur, a man of leisure who wants to slow down the world. He is more like a funambulist or tightrope walker; or better still, like someone traversing a mine-field in gingerly fashion, and mindful of the dangers. Like the slowness of Tsai's monk, stillness in Gormley is a kind of mindfulness about the pitfalls of experience, particularly in global cities like Hong Kong: the pitfall of rejecting it too hastily, and the pitfall of accepting it too uncritically.

If experience is linked to stillness in Gormley's work, it is linked just as importantly to a second characteristic: sensation. Sculpting experience has to begin by distinguishing between sensation as experience and sensationalism as the exaggeration and simplification of experience, at a time when they can be all too easily confused. In Gormley's work, experience as sensation takes different forms. One striking example is the early work BED (1980-81) . The bed of the title is made up of 8,640 pieces of Mother's Pride bread. Two scooped-out indentations -the material from which Gormley ate-mark where his body had lain. The work is interesting not because it uses unconventional material-bread rather than stone, bronze, or wood-to represent an unusual subject. In fact, the work is not essentially the representation of a subject at all; it can be more accurately described as giving us the trace of an experience embedded and remembered in the work's material, the bread that was removed and that the artist ate. Gormley's body made a dent or impression on BED, in more ways than one; and the work in turn makes an impression on us. The body appears in this work not just as a void or an absence. We experience it as an absent presence or a disappearance; in other words, as a precise and paradoxical sensation that the artwork enables.

Another example of experience as sensation in sculpture is the recent and much larger work HORIZON FIELD HAMBURG (2012). The installation consists of a huge platform measuring approximately 50 by 25 meters. It is held by 8 steel cables attached to the ceiling that suspend it 7 meters above the ground. The platform can hold 100 viewers/participants at a time, and its surface is a sensitive membrane that can transmit one person's movement to another. The 'artwork' in an important sense is none other than the sensation experienced by the viewers/ participants. Acting together, they can even make the platform sway, which produces a kind of disorientation and then reorientation, a reshuffling of spatial coordinates, a dépaysement. Gormley describes the membrane as 'a mediating platform'. It creates a space where the unconscious boundaries that exist between people, the 'event horizon' they cannot see, becomes sensation-the first step towards imagining other kinds of possible relations. Hence, the installation can be thought of as in its own way a 'machine for living', in a sense not unlike Le Corbusier's who advocated with that famous phrase removing from architecture all that is unnecessary or merely 'sensational', so that architecture itself can be experienced.

THE BODY AND ARCHITECTURE

In EVENT HORIZON and other Gormley pieces, the human body plays a prominent role, and this brings up a third point which concerns the relation between experience and the body. All of Gormley's work suggests that for the body to be a site of experience, we have to rid ourselves of many assumptions we have about it; in particular, the assumption that the body is what we know best, or that it is the basis of our individuality. Consider the way bodies are presented in EVENT HORIZON. Perhaps as an attempt to individualize them, it is always pointed out that the figures in that installation are cast from Gormley's own body. But what is more important to point out is that these figures are personal but anonymous. There are no surface details, no muscles depicted, no clothing to catch the attention. What we get is 'unaccomodated man', a 'poor, bare, forked animal'. And as a model for these figures, Gormley's body is no more than a 'found object'. These figures then are bodies that do not have the individuality of statues. Their interest lies in the way they occupy a space where a human being has been. The body then is not so much a defined individualized entity enclosed in itself as an empty spatial entity open to the experience of space around it.

When we place EVENT HORIZON together with other projects like QUANTUM CLOUD (2000) and STILL STANDING (2011-12), we see not only that there is a history of bodies, but also that the history of bodies runs in tandem with a history of space. QUANTUM CLOUD is made up of a network of steel rods, but at the center of the standing structure the shape of a human body seems to form; as if a new kind of subject-the data subject-were emerging out of the spatial history of a network society. STILL STANDING is a fascinating installation that took place at the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. Nine of the Museum's priceless collection of classical statues were taken off their plinths and placed on the ground, to share the space with Gormley's 17 solid iron blockworks and with the visitors. The classical statues display the human body in impressively idealized form, whereas the rusted iron blockwork sculptures have a pixelated almost steam-punk look to them. In the installation, different ideas of the body and different spatial histories confront each other. This bodily and spatial-historical confrontation is also the drama of the segment of EVENT HORIZON that takes place in Statue Square in Central opposite the Hong Kong Bank, where the statue on a pedestal of Sir Thomas Jackson, the most important director of the Bank, is silently confronted by one of Gormley's anonymous cast-iron figures (see illus. pp.102-103). The contrast between a statue of an important expatriate individual who belonged to a certain moment of the city's colonial history and Gormley's generic figure-who could be anyone and come from anywhere-brings out the essential point about bodies in Gormley's sculpture: they are, as he tells us, empty but waiting, and it is their emptiness and patience or stubbornness that allow them to be 'a trap for experience'.

If Gormley's sculpture has a relation to the body and the way it is experienced, it has an equally important relation to architecture. There is in architecture implicitly an inside and an outside. On the inside, architectural space tends to be based predominantly on human dimensions, which becomes the tacit measure for the shape and size of doors, windows, ceilings and so forth, while on the outside it is based on considerations like human ambition which has no measure. Interestingly, in a project like ALLOTMENT (1995-2008), we see Gormley reversing and collapsing these tendencies allotted to inside and outside. 300 collaborators, men women and children of all ages are carefully measured, and these human measures are used to construct sculptures that look like miniature Brutalist buildings with apertures that correspond to human features like mouth, ears, anus, and genitals. These are not buildings that house bodies; they are body-buildings.

Experiencing the body and its potential requires, as we saw, contesting our assumptions about the body; similarly, the experience of architecture also requires the contestation of the architectural. HORIZON FIELD HAMBURG as a 'machine for living' already experimented with dépaysement. BLIND LIGHT (2007) does something analogous. The installation consists of a large glass container filled with a dense cloud. Viewers step inside the container and lose their sense of orientation because they cannot even see their hands or feet. Gormley compares this loss of orientation to the loss of self in meditation. In both instances, we give up our complacent sense of being at home in the world in order to see it in a different light: a blind light.

Perhaps the most witty and striking contestation of architectural space by means of sculpture is the installation DRAWN (2000), which makes us doubt our assumptions that space is somehow stable and comprehensible. In a white well-lit perfectly ordinary oblong room, 8 black humanoid figures cling to the room's 8 corners, as if some invisible centrifugal force (Gormley tells us) had flung them there. This immediately produces a certain sense of strangeness as these cast iron figures are very heavy, each weighing 630 kilograms. Another moment of strangeness follows when the viewer

enters the exhibition room. He or she will have to occupy the center of the room where normally the sculptures would be. Viewer and viewed have perforce exchanged places: the viewer is now the viewed. In this space of I-see-you-seeing-me-seeing-you, these heavy pitch-black figures silhouetted against the white ground seem to be floating, irrespective of whether they are near the ceiling or the ground, as if they were flying Apsaras. On the other hand, there is something a little too dark and sinister about them to allow us to see them as celestial beings and protectors of space. In fact they seem to be more like rats, or better still, like parasites in the sense that French philosopher Michel Serres gives to the term. In French, parasite means not just a leech, but also the noise or static that interferes with communication systems. Serres's important argument is that noise is part of any communication system and not extraneous to it; just as the argument of DRAWN is that spatial anomalies as 'noise' are part of every architectural system. Gormley's sculptures are like noise in the room, parasites that lead us to experience a kind of negative epiphany-by making us suddenly understand that we do not understand the space that we inhabit.

PUBLIC ART: GORMLEY IN HONG KONG

In Gormley's innovative sculptures and installations, noise, anomalies, and interruptions are indirect ways of experiencing a contemporary world that might otherwise be closed to us, like a black hole. However, what is even more important for Gormley than the production of individual artworks, is the production of cultural space. This is not a task for the individual artist alone. It requires a concerted effort to turn the space we live in-which increasingly will be cities-into a space that sustains us both spiritually and materially; a cultural space we can all share. Art becomes then in a very important sense, public art; and experience becomes not a private affair, but something that can be shared and communicated.

Art is public not because it is in a public place or outside a museum, but when it is a collaborative act. In this sense, the Jackson statue in Statue Square is not an example of public art. It presents itself to us as a finely finished work, set on a pedestal as a monument for viewers to admire or reject, but the public had no hand in its making. By contrast, when Gormley puts one of his generic figures in front of the Jackson statue, viewers have to contribute to the process of the installation becoming-art or becoming-meaning if they are to see it as an artwork at all. We have already seen a much more elaborate example of public art as collaboration in HORIZON FIELD HAMBURG. Yet another example is the installation on a platform in Trafalgar Square called ONE & OTHER (2009) Instead of putting a statue on the platform, Gormley invited participants to occupy it, each for one hour. This went on for 100 days, 24 hours a day. During their hour, the participants could do whatever they liked, including doing nothing at all. The artwork is the participation.

Because public art involves the participants in a collaborative act, the results are always unpredictable. Some participants may want to take the work one way, while others may prefer it to go in a different direction. Collaboration does not require consensus nor does it have to begin or end with consensus. What it requires is dialogue and communication, which are clearly implied in Gormley's notion of art as a 'materialized proposition': as a proposal to see things in a certain way, and a willingness to see things differently. What we are moving towards therefore is the notion of public art as an experiment in democratic ways of doing art and in democratic living.

It is Gormley's theory and practice of art as an experiment in democracy that may prove to be what is most significant about his visit to Hong Kong. Gormley's work in Hong Kong could help those of us committed to the future of the city think through what is perhaps the most crucial issue that lies ahead, the relation between culture and politics. Undoubtedly the pivotal event in Hong Kong's history after the Handover of 1997 was the Occupy Hong Kong Movement, later renamed the Umbrella Movement, which unfolded over several months towards the end of 2014. Many think of it as a political event instigated by high school students, and the issue as democratic election of the next Chief Executive in 2017. But it was also, as it turned out, a cultural event that raised fundamental issues about urban space and art, in ways that are comparable to what Gormley does in his work. The Umbrella Movement was an unprecedented and unpredictable event, and hence hard to explain. As many of the key players are so young, some critics saw it in terms of a generation gap, and the participants as passionate, idealistic, but basically naïve and immature. The Movement has been called many things, from 'an impractical form of populist democracy' to a 'phony disobedience movement'. 'Progressive' critics saw the Movement in equally simplistic ways, as an issue of democracy and self-determination, but an abstract notion of democracy without historical specificity. What has been largely ignored, and what Gormley's work directs our attention to, are the cultural dimensions of the Movement and their imbrication in politics.

First and foremost, it was a spatial event. The demonstrators tried to disrupt the city by disrupting traffic with barricades or their own bodies. This tactic of spatial interruption produced unpredictable outcomes. At one level, the outcome was unexpectedly negative. The demonstrators lost the support of many ordinary citizens, including taxi drivers who lost fares, street vendors who lost business, and old people who could not get to hospitals. But at another level, the outcome was surprisingly positive. Like in Gormley's work, the spatial interruption allowed the demonstrators to see the city in a different light, in a blind light. They became aware that spatial configurations other than the established ones were possible. This sensation of new possibilities can be related to the fact that the protest sites were the chosen venues for new beginnings, for weddings and even births to take place. They were also where we saw artworks being produced. These artworks were on the whole ephemeral products of the moment, sometimes crude, and hardly masterpieces; nevertheless, they marked the moment. They took their energy from what was happening on the streets, and this gave them an edginess that separated them from kitsch. Just as the Umbrella Movement changed perceptions of the city, so its art changed perceptions of art. It was a public, collaborative art, and also art as something we ourselves can do, not just something only artists can do. If nothing else, the Movement allowed the city to tap into its own creative energies, which had for so long been too narrowly channeled and directed towards instrumentalist goals.

Another unpredictable aspect of the Umbrella Movement was its relative longevity, the way it lasted beyond all expectations. When participants were asked about why they stayed on even against strong pressure from parents and teachers and at some personal risk to themselves, many said it was because the intense friendship they experienced in the movement was something they had never experienced before. Friendship in this context has more than a personal meaning. It also connotes imagining forms of collaboration based not on consensus in the sense of everyone having the same opinion, but on difference, diversity, and dialogue. 'Opposition is true friendship', as Blake reminded us. A 'politics of friendship' means organizing a movement or a society or an artwork not from top down or bottom up, but laterally; where we find not paternalistic relations of parents to children, but relations between brothers and sisters, or better still, between friends. The way the Movement is organized around friendship is not an abstract lesson in 'democracy'. It is a practical lesson on living together as a public; and it is a lesson we are still trying to understand.

Now that the protest sites have been long cleared, and Hong Kong seems to have gone back to business as usual (to the relief of some), it may be time to ask what the lesson meant. The Movement failed at one level to achieve its goals; the 'politics of friendship' in this instance could not be sustained. But even as it failed, the protest by interrupting the flow of everyday life nevertheless showed us something about the different possibilities of Hong Kong's cultural space. It was a demonstration, in many senses of the word. Etymologically, the word is related to d?mos, the people, and politically the demonstration was if nothing else a public show of feeling, complicated by the fact that the public was a divided one. But the word is also related to monstrum, which interestingly has the double sense of 'divine omen' and 'monster', suggesting that we can show something by positive

means through 'revelation' or negatively, through aberrations and monstrosities.

Gormley's artworks too are demonstrations, quite irrespective of whether or not he sympathizes with the Hong Kong students. They demonstrate, by interrupting our assumptions about the body, architecture, the city, and even art itself, how experience is possible even today. Gormley's work is critical and reflexive, but it is not judgmental. It does not take the form of a critique that argues that something is true or false, but the form of a demonstration that like an experiment, shows us that the way things are is not the only way; it can be otherwise. Is that what these silent figures installed on Hong Kong's roof tops with their gaze fixed on distant horizons are demonstrating, the possibility that things can be otherwise?
