ANTONY GORMLEY

MARGARET IVERSEN - SCULPTING DARKNESS

From ROOM, Corbin & King, London, England, 2014

Sculpting Darkness
Margaret Iversen

The experience of being inside ROOM is difficult to describe and nearly impossible to photograph as it cannot be consumed as an image; in fact, it was designed as an experiential work of art, an installation that can only be appreciated at first hand. It forms part of a suite of rooms which, like the others in the Beaumont Hotel, is decorated in deco-style dark polished wood trim against white walls. ROOM is approached via a corridor and a flight of nine white marble steps leading up to a threshold marked by a heavy black curtain. Behind the curtain, there is narrow doorway reminiscent of the entrance to an Egyptian tomb. The threshold is also marked by the treatment of the door frame which is a clean incision in the fabric of the building that allows one to see in cross-section the outer steel skin, foam insulation, a thin plywood layer and finally the thick dark fumed oak which clads the entire interior. There is a ceremonial or ritual character to this passage to another place far removed from the luxurious decor of the suite and from the bustling city outside. As Antony Gormley has declared, ROOM is an attempt 'to bridge the gap between sacred and domestic space'. [1]

The space, which is the void inside a crouching steel giant, is cavernous. Upon entering, one first sees the raised floor of the bed covered in plain white linen and spot-lit from above so that it glows softly with reflected light like the moon. Lying on the bed, one turns off the spots and darkness descends. As vision slowly adjusts to the dim light, the complex arrangement of geometric forms hovering above gradually comes into view; one begins to make out the form of the figure: the slope of the back and shoulders and the entry point into the neck and head. The shafts on either side of the bed are the base of the legs. Low lights placed in the depths of the limbs and head enhance the perception of depth. In a statement about the piece, Gormley has said that this project gave him the opportunity to 'sculpt darkness'. [2] He wanted to create an analogue of the place you go when you close your eyes and dream - the dimension-less deep dark inner space beyond appearances.

Inevitably, people will respond to the experience of ROOM in different ways. This will partly depend on what or who they bring with them. The psychological predisposition of the visitor may be crucial: claustrophobia and its opposite agoraphobia are pathologies that disclose something about the relation of mind, body and space. Visitors to ROOM may feel incarcerated in the enclosed space or liberated by the shadowy limitlessness of the 10-metre high ceiling. For the chronically claustrophobic there is a high shuttered window which, when opened, reveals a James Turrell-like framed infinity of the sky. The window is a membrane dividing the spheres of infinite inner space and infinite outer space. In fact, Turrell's installations, which immerse the visitor in opaque coloured light, is close to what ROOM achieves with darkness.

ROOM is likely to give rise to a number of other sensations and associations. Given the relatively narrow entrance and cavernous space, it may recall the primordial condition of humans as cave-dwellers. Caves, for our ancestors, did not merely provide shelter but, as their drawings testify, were ceremonial sites - 'locations of imagination' as the artist put it. [3] In myth and religion, caves are a place of retreat from the world and a portal to another supernatural or unconscious domain. Some scholars believe that the unusual acoustic quality of the caves was also valued. Werner Herzog, filming the paintings deep inside the 30,000 year old Chauvet Pont-d'Arc cave in Southern France for CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS was moved to say that the cave represented for him 'the awakening of the modern human soul' - the creation of 'something that we are still carrying in us'. [4] Gormley has remarked that ROOM is 'both the cave and the man who withdraws into the cave'. [5]

The enclosed darkness, silence and isolation of the chamber may evoke associations with the interior of a tomb. One is returned to 'mother earth' in the hollow of a cave-like structure. Also, since the visitor is imaginatively in the space of another body, ROOM is also reminiscent of our primary experience of being in the womb and, thus, also acknowledges the possibility of rebirth. The space, then, may evoke a primordial spirituality associated with Palaeolithic and other types of caves, a sense of human finitude and confinement as in a tomb, or feelings of security and comfort as in the womb. The acoustic of the oak-lined room muffles all sound from outside. This silence is amplified by the absence of the usual hotel room accoutrements.

The darkness of ROOM deserves special consideration. While light tends to define and sharpen our sense of the boundaries of the body, darkness seems to invade it. Half asleep, slipping in and out of consciousness, the body loses its definition and the mind expands. In this state, darkness envelops us and we shed the boundary that distinguishes self from other. The Russian-born French philosopher and psychiatrist, Eugène Minkowski, has written an eloquent account of the phenomenology of darkness. Darkness, he wrote, 'does not spread out before me but touches me directly, envelops me, embraces me, even penetrates me, completely passes through me, so that one could almost say that while the ego is permeable by darkness it is not permeable by light. The ego does not affirm itself in relation to darkness but becomes confused with it'. [6]

Gormley is interested in this evanescent state of being and explored it very effectively in one of his experimental environmental works. BLIND LIGHT (2007) was a large glass box containing a bright dense fog in which people lost sight of themselves and all sense of orientation. Instead of the architecture excluding the elemental, this box contains the weather in the form of a cloud. Inside the box, as Gormley has said, 'you become, in a way, a consciousness without a body'. And further, 'It's a kind of social experiment.
The idea of separating people from all the things that make them certain about where they are or maybe who they are'. [7] Viewers outside the box saw people materialising behind the glass before being enveloped again. At the time of its creation, Gormley regarded this piece as the closest he has come to providing an environment that mirrors the experience of meditation, where you lose your sense of self. [8] He has also evoked the ephemerality or volatility of the body in a number of sculptures, including DRIFT I (2007 / 2012), a piece made by welding together a matrix of metal spikes to form what looks like a chaotic field, until, seen from certain angles, a figure crystallises at its core. The title makes reference to the science of sub-atomic particles which has discovered the dynamic, chaotic character of energy and matter.

Gormley has also reflected on these liminal states in his drawings. His extensive series of 'Dark Drawings', which goes back to 1980, explores the bodily and psychic experience of being immersed in darkness and space. One early example shows the spindly figure of a man whose extended limbs and head articulate the otherwise dimensionless inky black ground of the page, as if consciousness were attempting to find coordinates in space. There are several early drawings of figures in a cave where the bodies merge with the inky contour of the cave. Recently, he has made a series of 'axonometric' drawings of ROOM and other 'Blockworks'. This type of perspectival rendering, where parallel lines do not converge, is often

used by architects to give a solid-looking three-dimensional view of a structure. By extending the orthogonal lines to the edge of the page and sometimes multiplying the perspectival matrix with paler lines around the figure, Gormley has reversed that effect so that the depicted sculpture seems to vibrate and lose determinate boundaries. Another series of drawings shows overlapping semi-transparent veils of black watercolour that appear to go in and out of focus, perhaps recalling some of Mark Rothko's sombre canvases such as his late Seagram mural project. Perhaps an even better comparison would be with Ad Reinhardt's late series of 5-foot square black paintings out of which a tonal grid gradually emerges. The comparison is particularly appropriate as Reinhardt was a serious scholar of Asian art. This aspect of much New York School painting has been obscured by its formalist reception. As Alexandra Munroe observed: 'As the 1960s unfolded, Judd's literalist views prevailed and the transformational potential of the viewer's experience of art became regarded as retrograde'. [9] The hexagonal shapes of the veils in Gormley's drawings are formed by filling in the outlines of 'axonometric' perspectival renderings of his 'Blockworks'. These drawings are particularly pertinent to ROOM since they are attempts to represent not an object as perceived in space, but rather something equivalent to the experience of being inside ROOM. They are attempts to draw inner space. This is a crucial point. From the outside, ROOM is a thing perceived in the ordinary, public, day-time of our lives; inside, however, it is night and vision is released from this fixity. The boundaries of the self-dissolve and we feel formless, floating, become one with space. Yet, in ROOM, out of this darkness, obscure forms, dark veils, emerge, creating what Gormley calls 'an image of imageless-ness'. [10]

A Brooding Buddha

The external structure, the massive crouching form, consists of welded plates of stainless steel - pale and matt, just as they come from the mill; there is no internal supporting armature. The compact seated position of the giant figure, who incidentally assumes a position impossible for those who habitually use chairs, is demanded by its function as a room. With knees drawn up to the chest and arms locked around the knees, forming posts and lintel, the figure is almost a cube. However, the head is raised and craned forward; chin just resting on the arms. The giant figure's posture is self-contained; he appears withdrawn, motionless, contemplative - 'brooding' is the word the artist uses. This aspect of the figure, along with its monumental proportions, associates it with the great seated figures of the Buddha. As Gormley pointed out in a lecture he gave at the Buddhist Art Forum, on the Wikipedia site, 'List of Statues by Height', one discovers that many of the tallest are Buddhist. He also noted that the twelfth-century Great Buddha in Kamakura in Japan is hollow and inhabitable. [11]

It is important to take into account the impact of the spiritual tradition of Buddhism and its view of life and ethics on Gormley's work. In the early 1970s, he lived in India where he practiced mediation for two years. He even considered devoting his life to Vipassana meditation, which emphasises the body as a channel for awareness and aims to foster 'a timeless relationship with the immediate presence of the body and its function as the site for the flow of events. At the same time, it creates feelings of dematerialisation, as the body's boundaries seem to open up or dissolve'. [12] However, instead of taking that spiritual path, Gormley decided to bring the wisdom and discipline of meditation to his creative work. He declared in an interview that 'those years of meditation remain the foundation of my work'. [13] Also important is his university training in anthropology.

The allusion to the Buddha in a work set in the heart of London might prompt us to reflect on the way we live now. Most of us inhabit a completely artificial built environment and conduct our lives at a frenetic tempo. Gormley has often spoken about how the built environment puts pressure on human sensibility. This sculpture and others he has made pose the question, 'What is humankind, now that 50 per cent of us live in urban environments?' [14] The monumental stillness of Gormley's seated figure, who has himself taken on architectonic form, makes us pause to reflect on that environment and consider what impact it has had upon us. The traumatic effect of life in the great city has been an important literary and artistic theme since the mid- 19th century. One such writer, Walter Benjamin, describes the shocks to the psyche and the defensive mechanisation of response necessary to negotiate urban crowds. Commenting on a sonnet by Charles Baudelaire, 'To a Passer-By', about the fleeting sight of a beautiful veiled woman bourn along by the crowd, 'amid the deafening traffic of the town', Benjamin observes that the verses 'bear the stigmata which life in a metropolis inflicts upon love'. [15] Seen from this point of view, the proximity of ROOM to Oxford Street, the most buzzing commercial district in London, could not be more appropriate. Gormley's giant figure is, as the artist says, 'in the city but not of it'. [16]

Yet if the giant Buddha is not 'of the city', why does it take on architectural form? Why does it resemble a Brutalist Buddha? Is the becoming-architecture of the body meant to figure the adaptation of the human being to its steel, glass and concrete environment? Judging by a number of Gormley's pieces, this is certainly partly the case. ALLOTMENT II (1996), for example, an installation made for Malmö Konsthall, Sweden, consists of 300 concrete boxes based on the measurements of local people. Gormley thinks of the measurements as 'the memory of an absent self'. Although small, individuating traces of the human body remain, including holes in the concrete marking the location of bodily apertures, the general impression is of a necropolis or a scale model of a high-density high-rise housing project. If there is a resemblance between this installation and one by Donald Judd, it is only superficial as Judd would certainly reject such connotations. As Gormley noted, minimalism 'invoked the forms of the industrial unit and the processes of mass production, refusing any association with the predicament and pathos of the human condition'. [17] He raised these issues in a statement relating to the urban grid, asking, 'To what extent do we form and to what extent do we conform to the dictates of its organised geometry?' [18] Have 'both the way that we behave physically and the way that we think intellectually been altered by this environment that we have created?' [19] He has also commented on the increasing tendency for people to live alone, in close proximity to others, but without interacting with them. [20] The form of Gormley's sculpture is meant to dramatise the present human condition and its effects.

Yet, Gormley's adoption of a Brutalist aesthetic, which can plainly be seen in the collaboration with architect David Chipperfield on a pavilion at the Kivik Art Centre in Sweden called A SCULPTURE FOR THE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF ARCHITECTURE (2008), does also have a more positive connotation. Brutalism has a bad name, literally. It was meant to evoke the raw unadorned material of concrete brut as used by Le Corbusier in his post-war architecture, such as the chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut in Ronchamp (1954). The 'brutalist' use of naked material and exposed structure was a reaction against what had become a watered-down and faceless modernism - the glass and steel curtain-wall grids with which we are all too familiar. Brutalist buildings such as the Hayward Gallery in London or the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York have a muscular presence and characterful facades. Given Gormley's critical attitude to Minimalism's abandonment of the figural possibilities of sculpture for pure abstraction, it is not surprising that he should be drawn to these highly sculptural Brutalist buildings. The exterior of ROOM thus has a powerful, rough-hewn, primitive appearance that will, with time, develop a weathered patina and look like carved stone, perhaps recalling some Egyptian block-like figures. Without dramatic spot-lighting, it is illuminated at night only by the surrounding city lights. In this way, the exterior of it resists the relentless spectacularisation and becoming-image, through mass-media and wholesale digitalisation, of our contemporary cultural condition.

Mind, Body, Building

Although unprecedented in scale, this conjunction of sculpture and architecture is not new to Gormley. In fact, it could fairly be said that his sculpture is a sustained investigation into the relations amongst mind, body and building. He uses sculpture to probe what it is like to be a body, a physical thing in the world, as well as a reflective consciousness. Does consciousness dwell in a body in the same way as we dwell in buildings, our second skin? How does the built environment affect us physically and mentally? With ROOM, Gormley has invented a new way of posing these questions. One way he did so in the past was by reducing the physical habitat to the absolute minimum. For example, his first sculpture, SLEEPING PLACE (1973), was

made by draping a sheet soaked in plaster over a person huddled on the floor - the dwelling place is a delicate veil expressive of the body beneath, in the manner of classical drapery. There is something utopian about the possibility represented here, especially when compared to Gormley's series of 'Bodycases'. He made these works, mostly from the 1980s, by wrapping sheets of lead around a mould of his body. Although the inert substance of lead is inflected by traces of the absent body, the works are nonetheless highly ambiguous: is the lead case responsive to the trace of the living man or a made-to-measure coffin? Certainly, the sense of isolation and confinement is palpable. Also relevant in this context, ROOM FOR THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN DESERT (1989), is an extremely abstracted figure of a crouching man, large and small boxes representing the body and the head, with little apertures marking bodily orifices, but it is also a minimal dwelling for that man. Pertinent to the form of this piece is the common cultural house-body homology; for example, there is a hatha-yogic text that refers to the human (male) body as 'a house with a pillar and nine doors'. In Gormley's 'Bodycases' and body dwellings, the self informs to some extent the inert material (lead, concrete) but those materials also seem to constrain the self. Thinking oneself into those spaces is to feel empathically that constraint in one's own body.

Yet there is a quite different way of responding to these works. Gormley recounts a story about how, as a child, he was obliged to have a nap after lunch in a small room and how he discovered, lying still with eyes closed in that cramped space, the freedom of movement, the play of imagination, within what might be called 'inner space'. [21] Later, at boarding school, he would challenge his claustrophobia by tunnelling down to the end of his tightly tucked-in bed. In adulthood, he has continued to probe this fear and attraction by becoming an enthusiastic visitor to Paleolithic and temple caves throughout the world. This biographical information is useful for understanding what motivates Gormley as a sculptor. The early 'Bodycases' involved a casting process in which Gormley positioned himself inside the work-in-progress where he was helpless, immobilised and blind for an extended period of time. In order to endure this ordeal, Gormley had to imagine the unlimited expanse of inner space. The 'Bodycases' and the small ROOM FOR THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN DESERT, then, should be viewed as objects designed both to prompt the sensation of bodily constraint, but also to awaken a sense of a space that is objectless, dimensionless, limitless and dark and also potentially collective. To imagine oneself into a 'Bodycase' is to assume a similar meditative stillness and presence and to experience the flip side of our ordinary, day-time perception of the world. Gormley associates the experience of inner space with another sort of unconscious - our submerged sense of the elemental world and natural rhythms - night and day, the seasons and all the creaturely givens of having a body, such as the need for sleep. Our contact with the elemental world is threatened, he believes, by our totally man-made built environment and by the 24 /7 work time to which we now adhere. How does the body fit into this environment? What falls out? Has our sensibility been altered by the modes or attention demanded by our digital devices?

These sorts of questions are addressed by HABITAT (2010). This is a large welded steel cuboid figure, very similar to ROOM, but looking more like a small house, positioned facing south on the street line opposite the Anchorage Museum, Alaska. Although it is somewhat smaller than ROOM and not enterable, it does offer shelter from wind and rain. Together with Anchorage Museum's collection of local ethnographic material, HABITAT poses questions about the relation of the human being to the urban environment. 'Habitat' is a multi-layered concept. As Gormley has noted: 'The mind inhabits the body, the body inhabits a house, the house inhabits a city and the city inhabits a land. Alaska is one of the last wildernesses. This is a meditation on the human animal's need for a very particular form of habitat'. [22] The elemental world is very close in Anchorage; the meditative figure, gazing toward the horizon beyond the urban matrix, is itself exposed to snow and extreme cold for much of the year.

Gormley recently made another giant figure for an exhibition at White Cube Bermondsey, London. MODEL (2012), is like a sleeping giant made of sheets of steel forming boxes that are bolted and welded together. An entrance at the foot gives viewers the opportunity to explore, like Lilliputians, the various interior spaces of the body, some of which are opened up to form 'courtyards'. The experience of the negative spaces of MODEL is a literalisation of the empathic bodily understanding that Gormley encourages in all his work and it is an important precedent for ROOM. From the outside, MODEL is a thing perceived in space, but from the inside, we are apt to lose our coordinates in the dim light. Experiencing the interior is a metaphor for experiencing the inner space of the mind-body.

Michael Newman has said that Gormley's sculpture 'has been concerned with how the specific concrete self-experience of the human body can connect with what infinitely exceeds its limits'. [23] This seems particularly true of ROOM. The artist wants it to 'resonate with the built environment but also with those deep memories or structures to do with birth and death: the womb and the tomb'. [24] Gormley is an artist who holds fast to the promise of art as transformative of our consciousness. It aims to bring that about by invoking the analogy between entering the mysterious space of a cave and entering the dark inner space of the imagination. It is an instrument for inducing a different state of consciousness. At the very least, it induces a meditative pause, a moment of withdrawal, before we plunge again into Oxford Street and get swept away by the crowd.

1 Antony Gormley in conversation with the author, 1 April 2014.
2 A. Gormley, Project Statement for ROOM, 2014.
3 A. Gormley in conversation with the author, 1 April 2014.
4 CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS, directed by Werner Herzog, New York: IFC Films, Sundance Selects, 2010.
5 A. Gormley in conversation with the author, 1 April 2014.
6 Eugène Minkowski, LIVED TIME: PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL STUDIES, Nancy Metzel (trans.), Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970, p.429.
7 A. Gormley, IMAGING THE CITY SYMPOSIUM, Southbank Centre, London, June 2007. Recording available on http://www.antonygormley.com/resources/audio.
8 A. Gormley, 'The Sculpture of Mindfulness', ART OF MERIT: STUDIES IN BUDDHIST ART AND ITS CONSERVATION, London: Archetype Publications, 2013, p.394.
9 Alexandra Munro, 'Art of Perceptual Experience: Pure Abstraction and Ecstatic Minimalism,' A. Munroe (ed.), THE THIRD MIND: AMERICAN ARTISTS CONTEMPLATE ASIA, 1860 -1969, New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009, p.287.
10 A. Gormley in conversation with the author, 1 April 2014.
11 A. Gormley, 'Sculpture of Mindfulness', a lecture given at the Buddhist Art Forum, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 14 April, 2012.
12 Thomas McEvilley, 'Seeds of the Future: The Art of Antony Gormley,' in ANTONY GORMLEY: FIELD AND OTHER FIGURES, Texas: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 1993. Text available at http://www.antonygormley.com/resources/essay-item/id/100.
13 'An Interview with Antony Gormley by Jan van Boeckel', RESURGENCE AND ECOLOGY, Issue 260, May/June, 2010. Gormley said in his Ted Talk 'Sculpted Space: Within and Without' in June 2012 that he thought of ROOM FOR THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN DESERT as a 21st century Buddha. See http://www.ted.com/talks/antony_gormley_sculpted_space_within_and_without
14 A. Gormley in conversation with the author, 1 April, 2014.
15 Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' (1939), in ILLUMINATIONS, London: Fontana Press, 1973, p.166; Charles Baudelaire, LES FLEURS DU MAL, (first published 1857).
16 A. Gormley in conversation with the author, 1 April 2014.
17 Martin Caiger-Smith, 'Larger than Life,' ANTONY GORMLEY: METER, Salzburg: Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, 2013, p.19.

18 'Allotment II, Interview with Hans Anderson,' in John Hutchinson et al., ANTONY GORMLEY, London: Phaidon Press, 2000, p.148.
19 Antony Gormley, 'Sculpted Space, Within and Without.'
20 A. Gormley, 'Field Activities: A Conversation between Antony Gormley, Ralph Rugoff and Jacky Klein', BLIND LIGHT, London: Southbank Centre, Hayward Publishing, 2007, p.56.
21 A. Gormley, 'Sculpted Space, Within and Without', op. cit.
22 A. Gormley, Project Statement quoted here: http://art-agenda.com/shows/antony-gormley-at-anchorage-museum/.
23 Michael Newman, 'Body as Place: Antony Gormley Outside-In,' in ANTONY GORMLEY: MODEL, London: White Cube Bermondsey, 2013, p.123.
24 A. Gormley, Project Statement for ROOM, 2014.