THALIA ALLINGTON-WOOD - ANTONY GORMLEY, IN FORMATION

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Where does your body begin and end? Where are you? How do you know? How does a space, and the bodies and objects within it, alter you? And how do you, in turn, change and alter them? Antony Gormley makes sculptures designed to prompt questions like these. Or as he puts it, 'How we might understand our own embodiment in both space and time?' [1]

The title chosen by Gormley for the exhibition makes his response to the question clear: that this is an ever-changing process. We, like the iron works that populate White Cube Mason's Yard, are forever In Formation, shaped by shifting relationships to the information we receive, the locations we inhabit and the objects we encounter.

Sociologist Roger Caillois wrote in 1935 that identity requires an edge. Caillois' subject was mimesis among insects and the phenomena of psychasthenia: when an organism takes on the appearance of its environment. Picture the Oxydia moth that clings to a branch, its leaf-like wings indistinguishable from the foliage of the tree. Caillois argued that in such situations, 'the feeling of personality, considered as the organism's feeling of distinction from its surroundings… cannot fail under these conditions to be seriously undermined', the animal 'no longer knows where to place itself'. [2] Writing on Caillois, philosopher and theorist Elizabeth Grosz asserts that the same principle can be applied to people: 'For the subject to take up a position as a subject, he must be able to situate himself as a being located in the space occupied by his body'. [3]

The blurring of boundaries between space and self, and the idea that subjecthood requires self-awareness of one's physical distinctness, is a good starting-point to consider Gormley's sculpture. Through his artistic practice, Gormley has long concerned himself with situating the body in space, as well as explored the idea of bodily dissolution.

Grosz's words seem to mirror those of the artist himself. When Gormley describes CO-ORDINATE, in which a gallery is divided by two taught steel bars that evoke the X and Y axis commonly used to describe the position and dimensions of objects in space, it is the 'co-ordination' of a body, Gormley states, that 'allows us to have a reality to believe in'. [4]

Conversely, both Caillois and Grosz observe that without a location in time and space, and without a boundary between space and body, our ability to know ourselves begins to disintegrate. Gormley describes having experienced this very phenomenon while studying Buddhism. On the feeling of meditation, he writes of a 'continuity between the space of consciousness'. [5] He describes entering a similar condition while casting his body in plaster: a period of dark stillness, when bodily 'edges begin to break down. You're no longer sure about where something you can call me, my, mine, I, starts and stops, and you become aware that human consciousness can be dispersed'. [6]

In works such as BLIND LIGHT (2007), MODEL (2012) and CAVE (2019), Gormley creates environments in which the visitor can experience the phenomenon first-hand. BLIND LIGHT consists of a glazed container holding 1.5 atmospheres of pressure, eight ultrasonic humidifiers and 70,000 lumens of light which deliver a dense cloud of blinding vapour. In MODEL (2012) and CAVE (2019), visitors venture into colossal metal bodies in which they are consumed by darkness. In all there is a loss of co-ordinates, unable to see your arm outstretched before you, space and time extend.

Caillois described the dark as an encounter with 'depersonalisation by assimilation into space'; quoting French psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski, known for his work on phenomenology and lived time, Caillois goes on to say that 'while light space is eliminated by the materiality of objects, darkness is "filled", it touches the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him and even passes through him'. [7] In darkness there is a disturbance between space and person, a loss of bodily edge.

The body forms presented by Gormley in DOMAIN FIELD (2003), manifest the merging of space and body. They are constructed using small, linear metal rods, connected in randomly orientated trajectories. The rods are organised to within the limits of the participants' human forms, but present the body as without boundary, merging into light and space. Looking at these sculptures collected and crowded into one room, the forms seem almost immaterial - diffusing into a haze.

By contrast, the nine new CAST AGGREGATE BLOCKWORKS created for IN FORMATION and installed in the lower gallery of Mason's Yard, have a very defined edge. They are made from a predetermined, rising canon of solid iron blocks, which abstract the human form and cut into air and space at hard right angles. Their oxidized iron surfaces glow orange in the bare, white rooms. Look closely at their surface and you will see their industrial birth marks: artefacts of the mechanical saw and polystyrene used in their casting.

Yet these AGGREGATES also present bodies abstracted to the point of illegibility. The iron forms might have a solid edge, but where the aggregated block that they are attached to ends, and limbs, hands, feet and face begins, is not always clear. Their bodies take on an unnervingly incomplete resolution that is not always solved by further scrutiny. Some sculptures seem to have appendages, others merge with, or emerge from their twined cubic masses. Despite their hard geometry, these bodies are not contained. Their surfaces erupt unevenly: a disturbed terrain of rising and falling angles and cubes that seem to expand and contract into the spaces the sculpture's inhabit, in a manner that also recalls Caillois' psychasthenia.

A drawing in one of Gormley's sketch books, made in preparation for the White Cube AGGREGATES, renders this shifting relationship between bodily form and space. In it, the boundary between the cubic forms of HOLD (2018) meet a dense cross-hatching of black pen that extends across the page. The shared linear marks and quick overlapping diagonals of the pen separate, but also blur the distinctions between sculpted body, block and space.

The way in which the AGGREGATES seem to encroach their own dimensions, calls to mind Gormley's earlier EXPANSION WORKS: organic, hollow metal shapes that do not register immediately as presentations of human form. Those sculptures show the artist's body caught mid-movement (in plaster), and then extended (through wooden spars projecting out from the limbs and torso of the cast). Gormley describes these works as an 'attempt

to renegotiate the skin: questioning where things and events begin and end'. [8] The body is shown not to be defined by the limits of its exterior, but by its potential to move into the spaces adjacent to those that it inhabits.

Gormley describes the AGGREGATES as 'materialised pixellations'. The phrase references how the sculptures are created: translated from a digital scan of the artist's body. Through this process, Gormley's body is dematerialized and reduced to lines of code, then cast in solid iron, to reassert a bodily presence. These sculptures offer themselves as science fictions. They ask us to consider a future where we, physical entities, are more often described by lines of zeros and ones. Walking towards these works feels like zooming into a digital image: the body eventually becomes an unrecognizable lattice of squares and rectangles. By muddying viewers' recognition through geometric abstraction, the AGGREGATES are bodies as information, and in formation.

Technology is rapidly changing how we understand ourselves: transforming our bodies and how they are perceived. Elizabeth Grosz explains how digital technology offers a fantasy of virtual existence that will 'bypass the gravity of the body'. [9] If this is the case, Gormley's AGGREGATES both insist on the body's physicality and suggest our ability to transcend from corporeality into pure information, while also asserting that, on our return, our self will manifest itself permanently altered, abstracted to the point of being barely recognisable.

On a shelf in Gormley's London studio sits a block of iron pyrite, in which a crystallographic lump turns into naturally formed, interconnected cubes with gleaming-sharp edges. Side-by-side with such geometric, geologic substances, the isometric silhouettes and surface terrains of the AGGREGATES can be read ecologically, evoking cell growth and elemental transformation. The way their metal-human forms dip in and out of legibility is reminiscent of naturally occurring mutations or biomorphs, as much as it is of digital formations.

In GUT, a rectangular protrusion seems to emerge of its own accord from the sculpture's stomach like a crystal growth. This can be seen alongside Gormley's molecular STANDING MATTER I (2001), or GROUND (2015), whose loose polygonal forms, like found rocks, gather into figuration in ways that evoke nature's generative forces.

Traditionally sculpture of the human figure has been seen as an attempt to stall time, but Gormley's sculptures red-flag our fleetingness and our frailty by direct comparison with materials like stone and metal.

In a series of works made in the early 1980s that includes MAN ROCK I (1982) and MAN ROCK IV (1983), the artist inscribed the outline of his naked body upon the surface of large boulders of Portland stone. Looking at these works, you imagine the cold, rough, gritted surface against your skin. The body registered on the stone seems to wish to pull away and emerge from the rock, recalling Michelangelo's SLAVES or Ovid's myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha. It makes one think of Gormley's HOLD, where the body tussles, trying to distinguish itself from a solid block. However, the MAN ROCK sculptures evoke a dependence on matter and present, through the repeated incision of a human form on the surface of a rock sculpted by nature; the memory of a clinging body now absent.

The counterpoint of absence and presence features in many of Gormley's sculptures. As is often noted, whether casting his body in plaster or through digital scans, the final sculptures are indices of a lived moment now passed: 'proof of where one body once was and any body could be'. [10] In the act of sculpture, this void is made physically present and the viewer is invited to reflexively project themselves into the vacuum. But at the same time, the corporeal gap inherent in the works, when compared to the materials used to manifest it, forces the beholder to confront their own transience.

Portland stone is a limestone formed in the Trithonian era of the Jurassic period. It began its life as the sea, heated by the sun until calcium and bicarbonate ions in the water combined to make minute crystals that accumulated into lime mud. Fragments of shell and sand then conjoined with this wet earth to form rock over an almost unfathomable period of time. This is the stone used by Gormley for the Man Rock works. It contextualises the body form in a geological time-frame that will far outlast the human marked on the rock's surface. As literary scholar Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, writes: 'If stone could speak, what would it say about us? Stone would call you transient, sporadic. The mayflies analogy is apt'. [11] Against the unfathomable timeframe of the lithic, the carved outlines in the MAN-ROCK sculptures are markers of our comparatively minute temporality.

The sculptures shown at White Cube Mason's Yard are cast in iron. While iron is associated with the industrial (indeed, part of the compound used to cast the works is connector iron taken from old railway tracks), it is also, first and foremost, a 'concentrated earth material'. [12] Iron forms the core of our planet and is essential to all life. It is there at the birth and decay of stars, it is found 3,000 kilometres below ground, and in the blood coursing through our bodies. It gives us our magnetic field, the density of our planet and our trajectory through space. It speaks of elemental beginnings and endings, colossal time, and - like the stone Man Rock works - our momentary but intimate ties to the mineral universe that we inhabit. When the rising canon of blocks of AGGREGATE sculptures such as FALL (2018) and STACK (2018) accumulate into human forms from a cuboid mass connected directly to the floor beneath our feet, they evoke the subterranean rocky, molten matter below: the source of the material from which these metal bodies are made.

The connection of astral and molecular conjured by the iron of the AGGREGATES can be seen in the drawings that accompany the sculptures. Roughly grouped, these works were swiftly executed using a Chinese calligraphy brush and invoke cosmic formations in deep space and the transmutation of microscopic cells. The black pigment disperses and bleeds into the paper at different densities. In EVENT V and FISSION II (both 2019), bursts of radiating concentric rings and burgeoning light emerge in a sea of darkness. In FUSE IX and APERTURE VI (also 2019), dark vacuums expand and contract to consume the white paper. These drawings of beginnings and endings fold into one another.

In HOST, the potential of such elemental emergence is made literal. First presented in the Old City Jail in Charleston, South Carolina in 1991, HOST currently occupies a room of the Royal Academy in London. Equal and tremendous quantities of clay and seawater are brought into the gallery space to flood and reside within a single room. It is the cool humidity and brine-smell rising from the liquid surface that hits you first. Viewed from a door-like opening, the predominantly orange ecosphere of silt and seawater is much the same hue as the textured, oxidised surfaces of the AGGREGATES.

The sensation of Walter De Maria's EARTH ROOM is to be found somewhere in HOST. First executed in 1968, the third iteration of EARTH ROOM from 1977 still remains at 141 Wooster Street, New York City where 197 cubic metres of earth fill 335 square metres of floor space to a depth of 56 centimetres. Like HOST, EARTH ROOM is a sensory encounter out of place: damp, rich scents of earth delivered in an expensive Manhattan loft.

The difference is one of metamorphosis. EARTH ROOM does change, but its intention is to remain constant: the earth is maintained, raked, watered and stabilised by its caretakers. In HOST, the elemental is given up to mutation and generation. Gormley describes the work as 'a primal soup brought within the frame of a museum', an 'alchemical meeting' and a 'site of becoming'. [13] HOST is an ecosphere where earth, salt, water and air intermingle and transform over time, holding the potential to create life.

Another vein runs through Gormley's sculptural practice: the conditions of our built environment. Referring to architecture as 'the second body', Gormley's works prompt us to consider how architecture and identity are inseparable and inform one another. In the words of Chris Abel:
…we do not have architecture, therefore, but rather a part of us is architecture. Architecture is a way of being…so when we come to define the true and deeper functions of architecture, we will not be simply describing the production of a certain type of artefact, but explaining one of the original ways in which we know ourselves. [14]

In HOST, it is the room that shapes the water and earth. But in turn, the room and how we perceive it is altered by HOST's muddy fluids. The acoustics, temperature and scent of the space are all transformed by its presence. We can no longer walk into the room. We look down at the mud rather than up at the fine, gilded nineteenth-century ceiling of the Academy, which now also appears at floor level, reflected in the water. Concerned visitors murmur of leaks and disaster. In their minds, drips of water slowly seep into the floors below, until an almighty collapse, as the colossal weight of liquid forces its way through the floor back to the sea. If, as Gormley describes, 'all architecture wants us to feel that we are somehow in a stable, fixed place, that has been and will be here for a while', HOST threatens this idea of structural integrity within the walls of a long-established institution. [15]

By interrupting and questioning our acceptance of architectural status-quo, Gormley's sculptures recall Roland Barthes' concept of visual punctum - when an element 'pricks' 'wounds' or 'bruises' the viewer, causing them to stop in their tracks. [16] When Gormley talks about his sculptures, the terms he uses echo those found in CAMERA LUCIDA: referencing his site-specific installations in Italy and Greece, Gormley describes his works as 'a type of acupuncture for what is there'. [17] In DRAWN (2000), eight cast human forms each inhabit a corner of the room, 'like black holes within the space'. [18] Gormley's sculptures puncture and punctuate architecture and space in order to cause the viewer to rethink their made environment and position in the world. LEARNING TO THINK (1991), consists of five lead body forms hung stiff above visitors to the Old Jail in Charleston, their heads pushed through the ceiling. When Gormley talks about this work he makes his intentions clear: 'the idea of breaking or rupturing the assumption about the permanence or indeed the use value, of the architectural conditions in which we live, is a function of sculpture'. [19]

This idea of the role of sculpture in relation to the body and architecture brings us to the STACKED CAST BLOCKWORKS created for IN FORMATION. These four sculptures placed in the ground floor gallery engage directly with the architecture of Mason's Yard. They are colossal: built from loose, solid cast iron blocks weighing between 11 to 700 kilos each. The individual cuboids are stacked, using their own weight to form giant, abstracted human forms that turn away from visitors and lean against the gallery walls. Unoxidised, the grey-blue metal looks like stone or poured concrete.

Viewed through the lens of Western architecture, the individual isometric components of BATTEN, LEAVE, SLACK and BRACE (all 2019) combine to transform their iron bodies into pillars: modern abstractions of the caryatids and telemons of ancient buildings - stone bodies of young women, baskets upon their heads, or strong muscular men, arms lifted to bear the horizontal load of the entablature, pediment and roof.
In particular, the telemons of Agrigento in Sicily echo in the forms of Gormley's four stacked sculptures. Once part of a colossal Doric temple, the pillar-men of Agrigento would have stood over seven metres high had they not been toppled by an earthquake. Their resting forms now lie on the ground and centuries of erosion has removed their defining features to reveal their modular construction. They, like the four sculptures in White Cube, were made from individual blocks stacked upon one another.

Caryatids and telemons are structural necessities as well as decorative elements. But as ruins, the human-columns at Agrigento reveal their vulnerability: they required their building's protection and support in return. Just as the cast iron sculptures at Mason's Yard, if released from their architectural constraints, suggest that they would also fall to the ground and break into parts. These STACKED BLOCKWORKS, like ourselves, create, are saved by, and constrained by our architectures.

As HOST threatens to collapse the upper floor of the Royal Academy, the STACKED BLOCKWORKS test the walls of White Cube, and our relationship to the building starts to feel less assured. Can the gallery sustain these colossal metal bodies pushing their weight into the fabric of the building? As they do so, we imagine their grey metal forms tearing through the walls and polished floor. These sculptures test the fabric of the gallery, and in doing so force reflection on our own built containment.

The rooms at White Cube, moreover, like most gallery spaces, are intended - idealistically of course - to be devoid of features and to function as 'a neutral area which can thus be filled subjectively'. [20] Speaking about the exhibition spaces at Mason's Yard, Antony Gormley emphasises how the galleries of White Cube hide their structural elements in an attempt to be ignored by the visitor. [21] The steel beams and girders, the bricks and concrete, the wires and pipes are all invisible to those standing in the room. An encounter with the gigantic STACKED BLOCKWORKS, each weighing up to three tons, brings these hidden structures and materials back into consciousness.

Gormley has long employed the rückenfigure in his work: a compositional motif in which a body is seen from behind, looking out at the view before them. This then invites the viewer to assume the perspective of the sculpture, and also to engage with the view beyond. In HAVMANN (1994), for example, the viewer projects themselves onto a body of arctic granite that looks out at the fjord of Mo i Rana in Norway.

In the ground floor room of the White Cube, we see the backs of BATTEN, LEAVE, SLACK and BRACE as they press their faces into the walls. An attempt to see from their perspective leads to new questions. What is beyond this blank view of theirs? A layer of paint, followed by plaster and brick perhaps. The stance of the sculptures suggests a move from considering their geometric anatomy to a consideration of the anatomy of the building. And beyond this architectural body? The tightly packed streets and infrastructure of London. If architecture is our second body, it follows that we extend this notion to the corporeality and materiality of the city. Grosz supports this direction of inquiry when she describes the metropolis as 'a (collective) body-prothesis' - an extension of our body that in turn constitutes us, our movements and physicality.[22]

In 2016, Gormley filled the central room of the White Cube Bermondsey with SLEEPING FIELD: nearly six hundred small scale cast iron sculptures in seventy-one different poses. Mapped across the floor, the cold metal bodies formed from orthogonal rectilinear blocks took on the appearance of a cityscape and prompted us to consider the repercussions of living in dense, urban environments. Speaking of the exhibition in an interview with Andrea Schlieker, now Director of Exhibitions at Tate Britain, Gormley put the question: we 'live embedded within the grid of the city, but do we fit?'[23] As if in answer, the anonymous grey bodies of SLEEPING FIELD call to mind Edward Soja's writings on postmodern urbanism as a form of psychasthenia (remember the moth in the tree?). Soja writes that, in the city, the self, like Caillois' moth-leaf, becomes lost, subsumed by an urban matrix that is ever in flux, structuring and determining our existence.[24]

Gormley firmly believes that sculpture should be a 'catalyst for first hand experience', a way to 'feel our lives and our being in time' and space.[25] Both the AGGREGATE and the STACKED BLOCKWORKS installed at White Cube Mason's Yard play with notions of instability - of the borders

between self and space, the boundaries of skin, interior and exterior, elemental and flesh, of the walls and architectural structures that contain us. In doing so, the works ask us to reengage with our place in the world, what makes us, and what shapes us. The works also suggest that the answer to how we feel 'our being in time' and space constantly changes as do we: forever in formation - constructed, transformed and in flux, shifting in relation to the bodies, materials and spaces we encounter.

Notes:
. Antony Gormley, ON SCULPTURE, London: Thames and Hudson, 2019, p. 36.
2. Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', trans. John Shepley, OCTOBER, vol. 31, Winter, 1984, pp. 16-32, pp. 22 and 28.
3. Elizabeth Grosz, SPACE TIME AND PERVERSION: ESSAYS ON THE POLITICS OF BODIES, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 89.
4. ANTONY GORMLEY: CO-ORDINATE, 2017, Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy: http://www.antonygormley.com/show/item-view/id/2531/type/solo#p0. Accessed 30 September 2019.
5. Gormley, op. cit., p. 146.
6. Quoted in Martin Caiger-Smith, ANTONY GORMLEY, New York: Rizzoli, 2017, p. 260.
7. Caillois, op. cit., p. 30.
8. Artist statement, 'Expansion Works, 1990-2018': http://www.antonygormley.com/sculpture/item-view/id/231#p0. Accessed 30 September 2019.
9. Elizabeth Grosz, ARCHITECTURE FROM THE OUTSIDE: ESSAYS ON VIRTUAL AND REAL SPACE, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001, p. 51.
10. 'The Body as Lost Subject: Conversation between Alberto Fiz and Antony Gormley', in ANTONY GORMLEY: TIME HORIZON, Milan: Electa, 2006, p. 194.
11. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, STONE: AN ECOLOGY OF THE INHUMAN, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, p. 30.
12. Conversation between Antony Gormley and the author, Tuesday 13 August 2019.
13. Gormley, op. cit., p. 68.
14. Chris Abel, 'Architecture and Identity', in ARCHITECTURE AND IDENTITY: RESPONSES TO CULTURAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE, 2nd edition, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 141-150, p. 150.
15. Gormley, ANTONY GORMLEY ON SCULPTURE, op. cit., p. 198.
16. Roland Barthes, CAMERA LUCIDA: REFLECTIONS ON PHOTOGRAPHY, trans. by Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 1980, p. 26.
17. 'The Body as Lost Sculpture', op. cit., p. 194.
18. Gormley, op. cit., p. 198.
19. Ibid., p. 14.
20. Debora J. Meijers, 'The Museum and the 'Ahistorical' Exhibition', in THINKING ABOUT EXHIBITIONS, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (ed.), London and New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 5-15, p. 11.
21. Conversation between Antony Gormley and the author, Tuesday 13 August 2019.
22. Grosz, 2001, op. cit., p. 48.
23. Antony Gormley in conversation with Andrea Schlieker, 2016, White Cube, Bermondsey: https://whitecube.com/channel/channel/antony_gormley_in_the_auditorium_2016. Accessed 29 September 2019.
24. See Edward Soja, MY LOS ANGELES: FROM URBAN RESTRUCTURING TO REGIONAL URBANIZATION, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014.
25. Gormley, op. cit., pp. 12 and 42.