THE ENERGETIC BODY: IN CONVERSATION WITH GUY COOLS

The Energetic Body: Guy Cools in conversation with Antony Gormley

'In trying to deal with the basic conditions of human survival, I began to examine the containers as well as the contents of the human body.' [1]

GUY COOLS: I clearly remember meeting Antony for the first time during a 'Catalytic Conversions' seminar at the Royal Opera House in 2000. We were co-sharing a session to inspire the next generation of choreographers and dance leaders. Then we collaborated on ZERO DEGREES, the piece by Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, which I am sure we will talk more about during our conversation.
Antony is very articulate about the body and the body's relationship to space, so he has been on my shortlist for this series from the very beginning. I invited him to participate every single season, but up to now it has not been possible. I am therefore very happy to conclude the series with him, and to finally welcome Antony as our guest.

ANTONY GORMLEY: Sadler's Wells is a wonderful place full of energy and bravery, and it has become a generating location for new thoughts about the engagement with the body in movement. And that means the living body in space.

I have always loved dance. It is less about finding visual inspiration than perhaps about literally being energised by that feeling of life itself being used as the primary material in an interpretation of life. There cannot be a purer form, in my view, than the idea of lived time shared in time between bodies, where somehow intelligence is expressed through movement - through action without purpose, or, in other words, action that is not directed to a cause and effect relationship. That is what dance is for me: a liberation of the body to a freedom of expression before words, before interpretation, that can be transmitted and received without the hermeneutics of language. That is why places like Sadlers Wells, where new paradigms of understanding the body in time can be engendered, are so important.

GC: You're right. Just a couple of minutes ago, before the audience entered, you said that this series links body and language, but actually, before language there is the body in space. It is a relationship that you have been researching throughout your career, and choreography, too, as an art form is about the body in space. It is maybe strange - and we will talk more about this later - that choreographers such as William Forsythe have arrived at the same point as you from a different direction, creating spaces that give people a choreographic experience. It is part of the journey I want to make with you tonight, a point to arrive at perhaps. So let's go back to this fundamental relationship between body and space. You have said that you resist the notion of objects or sculptures occupying space, and you want to create sculptures that activate, rather than occupy, space.

AG: This has to do with the semantics of sculpture, and how the body has been put to work in sculpture. If we think of the trajectory - we could start with the Pisano works in Pisa in the thirteenth century and go right through to Rodin - the body was always used as a protagonist within some narrative structure, be it mythological, religious, or political. This notion of using the body as an actor obscures something much more important, which is that the body does not have to be representational at all, it can be something else - it can be reflexive.

I think this applies to the art form of dance as well. The liberation that Merce Cunningham and his generation went through after the Jungian moment of Martha Graham was all about looking again at the syntax of the body in space: walking, sitting, standing, and looking at it as an intrinsic emotional language without the need to carry any narrative. For me this was the key question, how to begin to treat the body otherwise - not through the understanding of the relationship of bone to muscle to skin. Anatomy was such a vital prerequisite of sculptural excellence. In those days you couldn't really tell the world that you were a sculptor unless you understood anatomy, and then put that knowledge to work by making believable bodies, either in three dimensions or in two.

What do we replace that with? I think we begin to look at the body as a space, not as a thing. The body is the place that each of us, in our own way, is dwelling within. The collective subjective of the human condition is that we occupy a body.

I think we spend a lot of our lives trying to escape from it, but I want to get back to that place. You could call it the darkness of the body, because it is so obscure to us. But we can begin to mine it, begin to recognise it, to give it some presence. This means dealing with the body in terms of being rather than doing, which is a very important distinction.

GC: I remember you saying that for you, the ideal sculpture is just a simple stone that is put there in nature to mark time and space.

AG: Yes, I think the primal sculptural gesture is taking a found stone that might be lying in the river or at the bottom of a cliff, and standing it upright. Immediately it becomes a marker. Immediately it becomes a point of reference in space at large, against which your movement and your time are measured.

GC: You have said: 'I use Buddhist meditation in becoming very still. When you agree to give up your freedom of movement and you dispense with desire and aversion, something happens: a kind of concentration of energy.' [2]

In your own work you have been searching for stillness for a long time, using your own body. Did that come as a result of this? Is it a discovery that has autobiographical roots?

AG: I think I probably wouldn't have gone on this journey without having had a very strong childhood experience of feeling the space of the body. I was a child of the fifties and was sent up after lunch for an enforced rest - which wasn't really a rest for me, it was more like torture. But I was a good catholic boy and did as I was told. I was six years old, I went upstairs and lay down. The experience was of being completely still in this tiny, claustrophobic bed. The bedroom was an old balcony that had been glazed in, so it was very bright and very hot, and somehow the heat and brightness were right there behind my eyes in this absolutely burning, claustrophobic, matchbox space. I had been told that I had to lie there for half an hour or an hour, and the strange thing was that as I lay there, this tight, tiny, hot space became cooler, and darker, and bigger. The experience of going from imprisonment to release - being released into an almost cosmic space, the endlessness of a night sky - was something that I later re-

discovered in India, through studying Vipassana meditation.

I had had a fairly classical education where articulation was highly prized and where being articulate and being able to remember things that you had learned out of books was of high value, but suddenly, through meeting this very straightforward ex-businessman from Burma called Goenka, I learnt that high value could actually come from different sources, and that you learnt things simply by looking at what is when you sit still and concentrate on being itself. That gave me the key. I had to decide whether I was to become a Buddhist full-time meditator, a monk, or try to make something out of that realisation - in other words, make an objective correlative of what it feels like to inhabit a body. And I think that's what I have been doing ever since.

GC: A lot of your iconic work started out with your own body: making moulds, or casts, and putting them in different spaces - inhabiting these spaces, activating them, relating to them.
You selected a work that you created in Cologne, which is called TOTAL STRANGERS. Maybe we can look at some images of it and you can comment on them?

AG: I think that is a good idea. The piece was a commission from Udo Kittelmann for the Kunstverein, which is a museum space in a low building on the Cäcilienstraße in Cologne. It usually has a number of rooms, and I simply decided to remove all of the walls that created the rooms and open the space up. I made six copies of myself that were solid iron casts from a plaster mould, so that when you came into the space there was just this one body, but then there were also others outside. It was about reflexivity - taking this place of display and turning it into a hide from which you might look out at the real world, where there were more of these things. You might ask, what are they? What is the status of these multiply-produced objects?

They identify a space where a human being once was and could be again.

The interaction between the still time of these industrial fossils and the moving time of life on the street was really the subject of this piece. People were invited to go into the museum and encounter this singular body - to touch it, to feel it - and then look at its reproduction, or its copies, outside.

I guess I am trying to admit that this is the time of industrial production; these bodies are mass produced, they are not unique, wonderful hand-crafted objects, but are simply indexical traces of the place that a particular body once stood and that anybody could stand. They are being released, as it were, back into the world, in a place of display where you have to begin to think about everything to do with your position in space and indeed, the ongoing life in the street.

You may say, 'well, he is overegging this particular cake', but for me this was a really important moment of trying to interrogate time as lived and time as represented. You look out through this square window (that could be the size of a painting!) at the real world. None of these slides show those moments when the old lady on her way to the shops stops because her dog has a pee on the feet of the sculpture, but there was a way in which the accommodation of life around these empty, meaningless, nameless total strangers - or strange things - became a choreography. It became a thing that we were invited to look at, something very quiet and supremely inexpressive, that was also using the space of art not to explain, but to investigate or re-examine the conditions of life. It did this from the position of display, but also from behind it.

GC: You started off with a beautiful defence of dance, saying that dance offers an experience of time in real time. ZERO DEGREES was the first time that you contributed to a dance piece, making the scenography for this work by Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Do you remember how you got invited into the project?

AG: Akram just rang me up and we agreed to meet on the South Bank. He told me the story of him going to Bangladesh. At that point he wanted me to make him a tree that he was going to hang upside down from, but things evolved from there...

GC
... when you were working together on the piece, you made other proposals - more than one.

AG: Yes, I think we realised that the idea of doing scenography wasn't really the most challenging thing from my point of view. We ended up making copies of Akram and Larbi as rubber dummies. I took Akram as a rubber dummy on the Eurostar (in the luggage rack) and delivered him to Akram and Larbi, who were rehearsing in Antwerp. I had cut into his elbows and shoulders and knees so they were only held together by a rope connector. When Larbi picked up this very floppy object, it was just a fantastic moment. He started playing with it as you would with a doll, except that this was Akram, and it was Akram's size. Immediately something very rich and interesting came out of it - about body doubles, I suppose, but also about how something falls, and about the acknowledgement that the lifeless body has its own syntax that isn't meaningless. You could spin around with this thing in a centrifuge and it would take one position, and if you threw it into a corner it would take another.

I think at first it was Larbi, rather than Akram, who saw the possibility of a choreography that had to do with the living and the dead, or to do with a highly animated and intelligent body relating to one that was very evidently made of rubber. And then, as a result of this very first experience, we decided that the second dummy, which was a copy of Larbi's body, should actually be able to stand. It had floppy arms, but its body could stand up. In a way there was already a lot built into that, so it was then only a matter of clearing the stage and making sure that there weren't too many unnecessary distractions.

For all my distrust of narratives, particularly grand ones, Akram took us on a journey, and interestingly it was Larbi who was the Virgil in this: Larbi gave Akram the mission to begin to reflect on this particular story of going to Bangladesh as a Bangladeshi born in Britain, and to do it in a variety of ways. One of the interesting things was that we made a double of rubber out of a living body, but what Larbi did was to make a double of Akram, out of his personal story, by copying every hand gesture and every phrase of this story as it was told for the first time. I have no idea how Larbi did this. He is quite a magpie, very good at pinching things, but he is also very clever at structures. He managed to record Akram the first time he told his story of going to Dhaka and experiencing a culture that was completely his own, but that he had hitherto been separated from. This very personal story became a universal one about our present state of multinational displacement. What is an identity and from where do we derive it? The dummies became useful in a similar way: by making a copy you can look at the original in a new way.

GC: I worked on this production as a dramaturg, and you are right in what you said earlier, that Larbi, with his inquisitive nature, started to experiment and play with the dummies the moment you introduced them in the studio. But my memory of it is that they then got left aside, as there was movement material to develop. We rediscovered the dummies in the last days of rehearsal, when we moved from the studio theatre on to the big stage and Akram and Larbi felt lost in the space - especially during solo moments, when the other one just had to sit on stage. They remembered the

dummies as a way of relating and as a way of grounding themselves in the space, and this is where they rediscovered the playfulness. The dummies became a very important part of the process, because we needed an emotional counterpoint to the lamentation in the second part of the piece.

We can actually look at some of it. I prepared two video clips: One is a clip of the making-of, where you see how the dummies are being made in Antony's loft, and then I selected the last five or six minutes of the piece, where you see how the bodies and the dummies and the space relate.

(He shows two video clips, of ZERO DEGREES and of ZERO DEGREES. INFINITY, [3] the documentary of the making-of.)

Looking at it again, it seems that it is about emptying the space.

AG: Yes, it is a sad scene. I haven't seen this film, and I hadn't seen the scene of Larbi being cast in plaster. That moment when you are enclosed in a shell is really very frightening. I am impressed with Larbi's complete composure while he is being turned into an object.

GC: 'In all these works the body has become a place in which mass has been released from its stable condensed form into a field of energy.' [4]

There is another line in your work in which you create spaces where you want the audience, or the spectator, to have a particular experience for themselves.

AG: I think there have been two trajectories in the work. It doesn't look like TOTAL STRANGERS anymore. I have begun to use the language of the built world that shelters the body to articulate what it feels like to inhabit the body. You could say that it is a revision of Cubism, but we are looking at building bodies in the same way that you might build a high-rise.

GC: Sort of like cell structures.

AG: Yes. We have moved from physical pixels through to bigger and bigger volumes of mass. It is one side of the work that continues in its own way, using different forms of structural mapping of the body as a space.

And then parallel to that I think I am trying to make devices or structures that actually allow the viewer to experience for themselves. They are proprioceptive devices - devices for reconsidering what it means to inhabit a body, for example by making a room full of light and cloud, or by re-articulating architecture through multiple frames. My last real attempt at this was to make a platform of fifty by twenty-five metres that hangs seven-and-a-half metres from the ground and can take a hundred people at a time. There is no containing fence, but anybody's movement is immediately transmitted to everybody else's movement. In a way it is a dynamic model of the ideal democratic relationship between individual freedom and the collective body.

GC: I have brought in some images of this strand of your work. (He shows images of BLIND LIGHT).

AG: Ah yes, this image is of a piece I made for a show at the Hayward Gallery in 2007, BLIND LIGHT. It is a room that is about twelve metres by twelve metres and contains 7000 lux of light and very dense cloud that is ten times denser than any natural cloud. The threshold is permanently open, so that you walk across it and you disappear. You disappear not only to others but also to yourself. You can't see your feet or your hands. You are conscious that you are alive, but you are disembodied. You enter another kind of space.

This was a luminous version of what I was trying to describe within the meditative space of Vipassana, where you have allied consciousness within the body to enable an experience of space as infinite extension. This was exactly the same, but with light. Your eyes were open, but you could see nothing. You were awake and you were moving, but you had no objects in your vision. You were inside a space that had qualities - you could hear voices and you were aware that it was wet, that there was precipitation, and that you were walking on a kind of rainy pavement - but it allowed you free consciousness from embodiment.

GC: This is an image of another piece, HORIZON FIELD HAMBURG.

AG: Yes, this is the last instrument for collective proprioception. It is a 67-tonne structure that is capable of carrying a hundred people at the same time. But it also swings. It has an oscillation of about 0.18 Hertz, so it can move almost two metres. It has five tonnes of black polyurethane on it, on a very thin surface that is almost like a mirror. Edmund Burke said this wonderful thing, 'there is no beauty without some terror', and there is an important amount of terror here: you could fall off.

The interesting thing for me is the relationship between viewers and the viewed - viewers becoming the viewed. The sound of the people on the platform is transmitted to the people below, and you have a feeling of being in control but at the same time also losing control. The children are very much the teachers of the adults in how to negotiate this new experience of instability. You could say that it is a big black monochrome painting on which the public are allowed to walk. I did get people to take their shoes and socks off as they came in, and that was very important so that you could receive impressions through the bare soles of your feet. Everybody walking on that surface transmitted a vibration that was picked up by others and you could hear that underneath the platform.

Instead of a fence, we had a net that was one-and-a-half metres within the edge. You could say that there is not a lot going on here, but I think it was also an invitation to look out at the city. We removed all of the obscure windows from around the roof lights at eye level, and from that unstable platform you could look out at Hamburg. There were wonderful scenes of people pointing out to each other where they worked, or where they came from, or a scene on the street.
This idea of inverting the function of a museum, where usually items of unique beauty or miraculous craftsmanship are shared as objects of virtue, allows it to become a place that is in the world but not of it, from which you look back at the world and reconsider it, almost as if it were a representation of itself. It is a way of thinking of the space of art reflexively, rather than representationally.

GC: It is this aspect of your work that really makes me think of a lot of William Forsythe's recent work. He calls his pieces 'Choreographic Objects', and they are basically installations that give the audience a choreographic experience in the space. Again, you both seem to have arrived at the same point, although the journey has been a different one.

After ZERO DEGREES, you continued to work with Larbi. Is this one of the nice parts of the dialogue between the two of you - creating a space that is like a breathing room and then inviting the audience into it to have an experience? What Larbi seems to be able to offer you, is to bring that space

into movement.

AG: Yes, it is fantastic and it is like that with Larbi. You seem to throw him a few toys and he will say, 'well, I like this one and that one.' A lot of the things I gave him to play with during ZERO DEGREES actually ended up in BABEL. I did make him a little aluminium room to sit in, and he tried it out and we could see that there was potential there, but in the end we had enough with the dummies. Equally, the idea of translating a human body into a box that could be interpreted in multiple ways first came up during ZERO DEGREES, and we later used it in SUTRA.

It is very lovely to work with somebody who naturally wants to see what affordances a stick or a hat or a piece of rope can give him in terms of interrogating how a body can move in space. And it has been very fruitful. I think that Larbi's whole life has been an investigation of what is possible. Unlike Akram, who in a sense was born through the ingestion of a long tradition, Larbi is completely uninterested in forms for themselves; he is only interested in how he can mutate them to his own purpose. That is excellent for somebody like me, who wants to make diagnostic instruments with which you can interrogate the context, and the body, and everything in between.

GC: 'Gormley's preoccupation with encasing things places great significance on the skin as the boundary between the internal space of the object and the external space in which it exists.' [5]

Shall we have a look at a fragment of BABEL?
(He shows a clip from the production.)

AG: A bit too much moving of the furniture! It is strange to look at it now. I want to say, 'just hang on a minute.' We have an image here that requires a degree of stillness, but we are allowing these mutable things to take over.

One of the things I am very aware of is that we live behind our skins, but then we cover our skins with clothes, and we further protect ourselves in rooms, which become buildings, which become towns and cities. The piece was a meditation on this idea, and on the way in which individuals and groups cohere in something that we call the urban grid. It is an affordance, but it is also our frame. Now all these choreographed unfoldings are very beautiful, but I would have liked to have had pauses.

It is exactly the same as what happened with SUTRA. I made boxes; every one of the dancers had a box and I thought, well, there are lots of things we can do with these boxes but let's just try and find four arrangements that are going to become the landscape through which the movement will somehow be framed, or focused, or contained. But that isn't Larbi's way! (Laughter). It is wonderful, and I can't then come along and say, 'cut this.' Larbi has this incredibly fluid intelligence and wants to keep everything in, and everything that I do is about trying to keep a lot of stuff out. But I think that this tension between us has been good.

I also have some trouble with this plangent music that kind of anesthetises you. It is very beautiful, but I would actually want to be completely attentive, on the edge of my seat, because the relationship between body and space is being explored in such a precise way through the agency of the geometrical frame. I don't want to be in a lovely, soft, warm bath of a place while I am watching this. I have the same kind of trouble with the darkness. I didn't want the darkness. It is a very precious material, and darkness used as a form of anaesthetising the audience into a kind of hypnosis is not of interest to me. I think that dance, when it is really good, gets you absolutely to the edge of your seat, wanting to attend to levels of detail that you would never ever notice on the street.

GC: Would you say that what Larbi doesn't offer you, you have created yourself?

AG: Perhaps - but the fun of collaboration is that you get taken to places where you wouldn't go on your own.

GC: Last year, you had an amazing show in the White Cube Gallery, MODEL, which brought the two strands of your work together. You looked at the body from the inside, and also created spaces where people had proprioceptive experiences themselves. It was essentially an oversized body that filled the entire gallery.

AG: I think of architecture as being a second body. We live in a body that is always going to break down - our physical body - and then we put that fragile, unreliable thing into a second body that is super-reliable. Architecture is supposed to make you feel secure. I wanted to make architecture that made you feel exactly the opposite.

MODEL is a hundred tons of steel making a body, which in this installation you could never see, but could refer to in a model room. You could explore it, and suddenly this condition of being inside architecture was revealed as a series of volumes that actually kept you out - in a way it was like abstracting the notion of the interior and making it into an object that you could move around in. The right-hand foot was also a threshold that you could walk across and enter through. At the end of that first tunnel, which was the foot, you saw yourself as a silhouette in relation to the reflected light. You were then forced to modify the way in which you normally behave in relation to architecture, where you are able to articulate your own movement in the space because everything is visible and you understand the spatial syntax of where you are. Here this was replaced with absolute uncertainty. You had to use your ears and your hands and your sense of movement to negotiate spaces that were completely unpredictable. How these different spaces related to each other and how they related to light was something that you had to discover. Whole areas that you could take to be a wall were actually a threshold, and things that looked like a threshold were actually a wall.

Wherever you were in this body, you were aware of other bodies moving through it, because it had a resonance to it. It was a very responsive environment and the acoustic qualities of the spaces encouraged you to be like a bat, sensing your environment through your acoustic ability. The whole thing was derived from a lying form - a fallen body, me lying on the floor - but you would never be able to see that, unless it could be outside and you saw it from high above.

GC: You have also collaborated with Hofesh Shechter on a Barbican project, SURVIVOR, which was very different to working with Larbi. It was a one-off event, and it was really about exploring the space together from different angles.

AG: Yes. It was a kind of sketchbook of possibilities of bridging the intimate and the shared. There are aspects of it, mainly to do with spatial experience, that I would still like to recover.

It was the first time that Hofesh or I had integrated real-time filmmaking and archive footage into a production. (Guy Cools shows an image from the

production.) This was a bath that I bought for my house but that ended up in the production. It had a wonderful feeling of being a solid object that was also a place, and that obviously referred to the body. We used it as a kind of confessional, where Bruno (Guillore) here in the image is talking to God via the plughole. He becomes incredibly animated, but you can't see him because he is actually invisible in the bath, which is filled with light. There is a camera above him filming in real time, which lets you see what you otherwise would not be able to see.

The movement of shoals and herds and flocks was also part of what we were exploring. Rupert Sheldrake calls it 'morphic resonance', and I think we want to believe that there is something like a collective mind. Animals have it already, and the internet is a sort of objective correlative of it. The way in which the big murmurings of starlings have a meniscus, an edge, at the point when every bird turns - it is not possible that it is communicated by signal. It is literally an expression of a collective body, the same as with shoals of fish. Suddenly they will turn, and suddenly this thing that was a black silhouette becomes a reflective silver cloud. I was very interested in this as a demonstration of the kind of bodily intelligence that exists before words. As far as I am concerned, it is pure intelligence. In choreographic terms, the flight of starlings is one of the most moving, extraordinary things.

I just threw a lot of things at Hofesh and he was very kind and accepted them. I didn't accept his five Ikea three-seater white sofas, but he accepted my eight 15-kilo cannon balls! At a certain point they dropped from the fly tower and landed on iron plates, becoming other bodies involved in the dance. This is a central theme in my involvement in dance: you give the body either a frame or an object that in some way modifies its behaviour. There is a lovely moment in this piece where the dancers move like centrifuges on an old self-regulating diesel engine, and they are holding these 15 kilos of iron hand-forged ball. Spinning around, the ball and the body become one thing.
The idea of vertigo, of changing perceptions of body and space either by putting the body in relation to an inert object of high mass, or allowing the body itself to be an object in space that has its own inertia, in a way takes us back to the dummies in ZERO DEGREES.

GC: It feels to me that in a way you have been offering your art to Larbi to play with, and maybe Hofesh has here returned the service, offering his dancers for you to play with.

AG: Yes, it's true, and I didn't quite take it on. The principle that I work to in the studio is that I don't ask other people to do things that I can't do myself, and it became very apparent to me that a lot of the things that I was interested in doing, I could not do myself. It was a very strange feeling of detachment from the subject. I didn't want to take that responsibility of using bodies as surrogate bits of paint, using other people's lives to illustrate my ideas.

But I still love everything about the extraordinary agreement that happens in a theatre, when the audience accepts that they will give an hour of their lives to this collective space and that together they are going to go on a journey. The potential of that is infinite, and maybe we are only just beginning to scratch at the real potential of the space of theatre - not as a space of demonstration, but of exploration. In the end it is the energy of the audience that is reflected in the energy of the dancers. Dancers need your time and your attention. It is an incredibly open field of human experience that I think is full, full, full of potential!

GC: I think that's a great way to end. I want to thank Antony for finally being here...

AG: No, not finally...

GC: ... I had to wait for five years!
Thank you very much.

This conversation took place on 9 December, 2013.

Notes:

1 Antony Gormley, ANTONY GORMLEY (London and Göttingen: SteidlMack, 2007), p. 61.
2 Antony Gormley in Richard Noble, 'The Utopian Body' in ANTONY GORMLEY (London and Göttingen: SteidlMack, 2007), p. 24.
3 ZERO DEGREES. INFINITY. Directed by Gilles Delmas. (Paris: Lardux Films, 2016), available on DVD.
4 Richard Noble, 'The Utopian Body' in ANTONY GORMLEY (London and Göttingen: SteidlMack, 2007), p. 45.
5 Idem, p.21.