JON WOOD - COMMUNICATING VESSELS

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Jon Wood
Communicating Vessels

'An exhibition without people in it is not an exhibition.' [1]

I

Walking through the new building sites of London's Kings Cross - with its endless demonstrations of the way in which architects today envisage glass, concrete and steel space frames for our busy bodies and our twenty-first century work and lifestyles - provides a fascinating preamble to an encounter with Antony Gormley's sculpture at his studio, set in a quieter corner of this busy station district. Once over the threshold (to adopt a word that is becoming increasingly important to Gormley), we are met by RUN II (2019), an impressive new aluminium sculpture and the main work on display in the exhibition IN HABIT.

Artists have been 'taking lines for walks' for over fifty years and 'drawing in space' for nearly a hundred, but RUN II, like a number of Gormley's recent installations, is of a different order. It comprises a continuous line of square aluminium tubing that snakes into the space of the gallery and then meanders in an exploratory fashion through it, turning left and right, up and down, from the ground up, in an 'orthogonal free play'. [2] The cubic, aluminium line is hollow, as revealed by its sliced start and end points, and, in a sense, it is through the portal of this tubing, which serves as a kind of linear artery that carries our consciousness along it, that we enter and explore this geometrically delineated space. Such directional energy and linear movement are also evoked by the vascular quality of the work's title, at once a noun and a verb, which suggests a liquid passing through tubing or blood running through veins. RUN II thus appeals directly to us, harnessing our attention with this frontal open tube in a way that recalls a similar device in Anthony Caro's EARLY ONE MORNING (1962), a work which also confronts viewers head on, boldly inviting them to travel into the new beginning it declares.

Moving from inside to outside the material, RUN II is also an invitation to physically walk in and around an airy labyrinth of passages. Discussing it, Gormley makes passing reference to the work of a number of sculptors making abstract sculpture in Britain in the early-mid 1970s, whose work informed, and continues to inform, his work into the present. Amongst them : Garth Evans (b. 1934), William Tucker (b. 1935) and John Panting (1940-74), whose cleverly composed aluminium sculptures were catching people's eyes and minds in the early 1970s. [3] Panting's subtle sculptures were unlike much of the abstract metal welded sculpture being made at that time: architectural in look, but calibrated in close relation to the human body, as the poster for an exhibition of his work at the Serpentine Gallery in London, staged soon after his death, shows. [4] Evans' sculpture at the time was more ground-bound and floor-hugging than much of Panting's, and his small TRAP (1970), with its carefully constructed linear network of passages, articulated in strips of painted steel, was a work that caught Gormley's eye and mind early on. Tucker's sculpture was another formative influence and the exhibition he curated at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1975, called THE CONDITION OF SCULPTURE, had a lasting impact on Gormley. Tucker's 'Tunnel' series of works, in particular, informed the ways he thought about how the human body might be at once framed, coordinated and choreographed by a sculpture's material and spatial interplay.

RUN II shares many of the qualities of such earlier works, whilst extending their possibilities. It bears its viewers closely in mind, whilst the coordinates of this space frame are site-specific, taking their bearings from the main gallery at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac. Its surfaces are hard, polished and light responsive, subtly re-activating our sense of the familiar lines, volumes and spaces of a standard furnished room, comprising door, shelf, table, chair etc. Through them we begin re-familiarising ourselves, at one remove, with their dimensionalities, re-orientating our physical relation to them. These demarcated zones also invite us to ruminate on other ways of envisaging and creating inhabited space. This work reminds us that people make places, which then make people.

RUN II could be said to do for the spatial and volumetric poetics of a room, what HOW A TABLE WORKS (1986) by Gormley's old friend the American artist Charles Ray (b. 1953) - with its steel frames holding in place a metal box, thermos, plastic cup, terracotta pot with synthetic plant and painted metal - could be said to do for a table. Yet RUN II uses force lines, rather than formal outlines: metal lines that offer up feelings for modes of habitation, rather than descriptive, linear articulations of household objects. Gormley's approach is as spatially poetic as it is empirical. This is a characteristic of his line more generally and comes across powerfully in the sketches and drawings in his workbooks, as was recently demonstrated in his large exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. [5] Such qualities also carry over onto larger, single sheet drawings, as can be seen by REST (2013) on display in the exhibition. They can also be discerned in a new series of wash and line drawings, entitled 'Zone', in which areas of concentration and bodily presence emerge together on the page. Such drawings give new and fascinating insight into the kind of emotional energies that charge the sculptures and their dynamic line and space relationships.

RUN II also takes the explicit bodily presence of the artist out of the picture and puts the body of the viewer in its place. 'This is a kind of playground for adults', Gormley comments, looking into the work from the outside, 'viewers become the viewed for other viewers'. [6] For the artist, the ideal number of people engaging with the work at one time is 'about five or six', since this works with the scale and rhythm of the sculpture and allows for all those little 'acts of interpretation and enquiry' that viewers engage in not to be lost in the crowd. [7] It is an important point and one which is well documented in many of the photographs taken of his installations, in which viewers' active participation in the work is captured.

Standing back from RUN II and taking a wider look at it in the context of Gormley's work as a whole, you can see it as part of an important turning point for his sculpture. It represents not only his ongoing turn to the architectural, and to new investigations of larger forms of expansion, containment and enclosure that surround the body, but also a turn from the body of the artist to that of the viewer. RUN II, it should be said, also signals continuity: extending the reach of a larger sculptural project that, with the human body (of the artist and the viewer) at its centre, has been gradually developing over the last forty years. It is this ongoing, investigative project that gives Gormley's work its unique and important place within the history of sculpture in Britain.

II

When Gormley's 'bodyforms' were beginning to catch people's attention in Britain the early 1980s, the work was making striking interventions into a broader 'body work' field that was populated by various ideas of the body as sculpted, static and silent on the one hand, and as performed, gestural and theatrically staged on the other. The cast bronze sculpture of British artists such as Henry Moore (1898-1986), Kenneth Armitage (1916-2002), Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005) and other older generation figurative sculptors were still being exhibited at this time, but their approaches to the human body and their genre-orientated compositions were falling out of favour, as visualisation of the body more generally was being informed by other media, such as film and photography, giving figuration other modes and moods outside the immediate realms of fine art. Alternative examples of free-standing figurative sculpture were provided by a generation of sculptors that included Nicholas Monro (b. 1936) and John Davies (b. 1946). Their works moved, respectively, between comedy and tragedy, between the worlds of pop, music hall and cartoon culture; as well as film noir, psychological thriller and Beckettian existentialist drama. The bodies that were made during this new return to figuration were often specific and highly individualised, sometimes full-length portraits and veiled self-portraits, either attention-seeking or attention-deflecting, and always animated by some dramatic, psychic charge.

Alongside Gormley's, newer modes of figuration were also discernible across the practices of other exponents of the 'New British Sculpture' and emerging through an interesting variety and deployment of different materials, each of them entailing both different relationships to viewers and different sensitivities to place. We find Tony Cragg (b. 1949) working with salvaged plastic fragments, Bill Woodrow (b. 1948) with recycled domestic white goods, Kate Blacker (b. 1955) with painted, corrugated iron sheeting, Shirazeh Houshiary (b. 1955) with modelled earth and straw, and Jean-Luc Vilmouth (b. 1952) with household objects and appliances.

Performance was also being afforded much greater critical attention as the late 1960s became the early 1970s and as the body as the agent of performed action was increasingly explored by artists. [8] POSE WORK FOR PLINTHS (1971) by Bruce McLean (b. 1944) and SELF-BURIAL (1969) by Keith Arnatt (1930-2008) are good examples of body-orientated performance works that drew from sculptural training. McLean's poses, captured in black and white photography, were physical responses to the obdurate block of fact represented by the ubiquitous art gallery plinth, turning his living body into a temporary sculpture in the process. Arnatt's BEACH BURIAL, staged on Formby Beach in Liverpool in 1968, only a few miles from where Gormley installed ANOTHER PLACE (1997) thirty years later, was a particularly compelling example of group performance. Looking at photographs of people up to their neck in the sand, knowing that before long the tide will come in, is a disquieting experience.

Alongside this, the social sculpture of Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), with its particular blend of sculpture, performance and photography, was also inspiring artists, including the young Gormley, and striking new works were beginning to be made in 1970s Britain under its spell, by artists such as Paul Neagu (1938-2004) with his 'anthropocosmos' works combining bodies with cities, Martin Naylor (1944-2016) with his surprising renditions of the human body as clothing/vessel and Carl Plackman (1943-2004) with his elaborate and enigmatic installations of found and made objects, a former tutor of Gormley's, alongside Richard Wentworth (b. 1947) and Michael Craig-Martin (b. 1941). Such artists all helped disseminate a new and dynamic approach to the body and its relation to sculpture and encouraged people to think further about sculpture in relation to performance and photography. [9] It also helped artists think about the function of their work and its relation to society more broadly. Looking back on the early impact of Beuys, Gormley states: 'Beuys was really for me, as a student, maybe the most important single influence, because of his absolute belief in art as a transformative social process. He talked about social sculpture, he made works and situations which were a transformative process, of human consciousness and of the evolution of society.' [10] Such thinking was also allied both to a firm, and still ongoing, commitment to thinking about the status and function of sculpture itself as a discreet art form and, as demonstrated by the work of Phillip King (b. 1934), an artist whose sculpture Gormley has always held in high regard, to a full and constant preoccupation with investigating the formal and material possibilities open to it.

One of the powerful qualities of Gormley's work in lead, using the body as subject in the early 1980s, was that it drew from both sculpture and performance, creating a new kind of sculpture that synthesized many of the strengths of both. Gormley's sculpture was charged with a live, human energy, as well as channelling a sculptural stillness, silence and mode of contemplative address. Thus, the kinds of heightened experience enjoyed by viewers watching a performance were transferred to his lead figures, which were often taken from poses filled with tension or release: hunched or lying prostrate, reaching outwards or curled in tight. They confronted their viewers, harnessing their curiosity at the same time as they demanded contemplation. Viewing habits for sculpture were thus changed as viewers paid more urgent attention, engaging in face-to-face, body-to-body encounters, ruminating empathetically on their human predicaments and investigating with more sensitivity the forms and positions of the human body.

Gormley's sculpture thus demanded more from its viewers, rewarding them in the process. In doing so, it drew compellingly upon the body of the artist - literally cast out of actions and standing as evidential and indexical traces of lived moments - encouraging subjective, empathetic engagement with the work, deploying it as a conduit to encourage viewers to take him and his work personally, whilst also always reframing it more generally in sculptural terms as a symbolic instrument or vessel that stood for the lives of others. The predicament of being human, then as now, was the primary preoccupation of his work in the face of more art-orientated subjects, as it drew its viewers towards being in the world and towards existential questions of life and death, facilitating what Gormley has called, the 'need to return to first-hand experiences'. [11] Generating these, from the ground upwards, through sculpture still lies at the heart of his work.

A comparative foil for the new kind of sculpture that Gormley was making in the 1980s would be a work like Leonard McComb's PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN STANDING (1963-83). Although both works operate symbolically, McComb's modelled sculpture values likeness and anatomical accuracy - analytical looking over intuitive feeling - evoking the life class rather than the ground under our feet. These sculptures that are arrived at through different viewing strategies: the artist and life model on the one hand, and staged and shared self-examination on the other. Gormley was interested in dismantling this long-standing dominance of the artist and model relationship, and his sculpture continues to explore this reorientation of subject/object relations into the present, re-engaging the mind and body of the viewer (and of the viewed) through sculpture with a vengeance.

Across this new landscape of figuration in Britain, exciting new materials such as fibreglass, polyester resins and plastics gradually emerged, as did a vast array of materials under the umbrella term 'mixed media' and the incorporation of a large range of body-associated matter: from blood, sweat and tears, to fabric and items of clothing. The historical baggage of bronze was still weighing problematically on artists' minds and they were, on the whole, resistant to using it. Bronze represented tradition, a post-war sculptural moment that was past and a material for the production and distribution of reproduced objects. Part of Gormley's achievement as a sculptor was to return the body to metal and to re-enchant us with it. His sculpture re-engaged us with metal's sculptural poetics and pragmatics in bodily form and with ideas of durability and permanence it carried. Lead offered a subtle way into this domain. Soft, malleable and skin-like, it gave viewers something human-like to think through, as plaster had always done before. It also offered a long and soulful art history, from reliquaries to post-war children's toys, as well as a subtlety and humility that could face up to the metallic hardness, shine and high production values of American minimalist sculpture. Let's not forget that faced with the fire bricks of Carl Andre's EQUIVALENT VIII (1966), Gormley responded with sliced bread, through his MOTHER'S PRIDE, BED and CONSUMPTION works. Lead's

tenderness and vulnerability were then carried over into the cast iron when Gormley turned to it as his material of choice.

III

Rust, as well as the reflective surface of aluminium, plays an important role in this exhibition. A new rusted cast iron figure, FILL (2019) serves as both guardian and a welcoming introduction, greeting visitors approaching RUN II. Its rust both brings the weather with it, reminding us that it has been exposed to the elements, and offers up a tender and friable surface for us to think sympathetically about its figuration. The sculpture is part of his larger CAST LINER or LINER series. Like others in this series, it starts with a scan of Gormley's own body and then explores it from within, through a continuous linear scoping out of its interiority.

Looking at these works in the light of his previous single, free-standing bodyforms, we can discern some important shifts in sculptural conceptualisation. We find a move from moulding to scanning, from wrapping to mapping, from layering to delineating, and from body case to body form. Such shifts entail a different sculptural conceptualisation of embodiment and through this, we also find a shift in attitude towards the viewer. More is now asked of the viewers of his work. They are invited to be more proactive and participatory - to dig deeper, you might say. Invitations to move, look and feel coincide with invitations to interpret and decipher: to read the work as well as sense it, and to enter into its realm physically and cerebrally, as much as emotionally. Their delicate rusted surfaces seem to heighten the quality of this invitation.

Gormley has referred to these works' delineations as 'arteries for feelings' and, with this, his thoughts about internal body sense comes to mind:

'Where do you go when you close your eyes?
You experience the internal body. Here is the darkness of the body: a dimensionless, object-less, edgeless space.
How do you begin to map it?' [12]

The answer for Gormley is currently through works such as those in cast iron on display in the exhibition IN HABIT. Like FILL and LEVEL, HEAD (2019) and FLOAT (2019) combine vertical and horizontal compositions: the body standing, the body on its head and shoulders and also the body lying down. Such positions can evoke life and death, but in these works something else more gymnastic and gravity-defying is articulated, with sculptures that strike poses suggestive of physical exertion, skill and agility. We read these figurative delineations very much in terms of their internal energies and in relation to their lines of inner force and endurance.

FLOAT, for example, gives us a poised, well-balanced body whose physical tensions in head, neck, solar plexus and feet are felt as we view it. It is a difficult position to maintain, and our inner experience and bodily awareness of this fact catalyses our appreciation of the work. FLOAT declines to recline, separating itself off from all those other recumbent figures that populate the history of sculpture, whilst at the same time drawing upon their skilfully articulated inner energies and emotional infrastructures. FILL has a similar effect. It is not on usual sculptural sentry duty, but our sense and awareness of our own experience of blood rushing through our vessels, in this case from our feet to our head, chimes with our simultaneous knowledge that this iron sculpture has itself, in a sense, been given this treatment: its arteries-cum-armatures loosely resembling the molten iron-filled risers and feeders of the casting process that structure and constitute the work. Made through a combination of casting and Rhino 3D computer programming, they are sculptures that tell the story of their own making. Our sense of FILL and other liner works is compelling in this respect: that they are created simultaneously from old and new technologies, and that both sculptural and digital production processes, together and in unison, are a crucial part of the meaning of the work. [13]

LINERS are cast as neural networks, metallic metabolisms that delineate a body that expands and contracts across and inside itself, each work containing its own individual pressure points and nodal moments. Gormley has called this body of work 'diagnostic instruments'. It is a powerful phrase, suggestive of searching not finding, of actions not objects, and highlighting the fact that these works might, in a sense, be renditions of changing conditions and temporary body circumstances, rather than fixed demonstration models. It also conjures up the operating theatre as much as the sculptor's studio and foundry, but it shows the ways in which Gormley sees these sculptures as precision tools. In this way, they stand as highly capable, insightful sculptures: agile and inquisitive objects that, once in our hands and heads, and once their ideas are running through our bloodstreams, might help us think and feel differently about ourselves and catalyse other, different ways of experiencing, feeling and thinking about our bodies and our environments.

Notes:
1. Antony Gormley in conversation with the author, 20 December 2019.
2. Antony Gormley in conversation with the author, 14 January 2020.
3. For useful publications on John Panting's work, see JOHN PANTING REDISCOVERED, London: Poussin Gallery, 2007 and Sam Cornish, JOHN PANTING: SCULPTURE, Bristol: John Sansom & Co., 2012.
4. This exhibition poster shows: 'Untitled' (1972) (reference 5.06 in Cornish's catalogue) and 'Untitled III' (1972-73) (reference 5.07 in Cornish's catalogue).
5. See 'Antony Gormley', Royal Academy of Arts, 21 September - 3 December 2019, and ANTONY GORMLEY, London: Royal Academy Publications, 2019, pp. 174-83.
6. Antony Gormley in conversation with the author, 14 January 2020.
7. Antony Gormley in conversation with the author, 14 January 2020.
8. For a useful coverage of this, see Lea Vergine, BODY ART AND PERFORMANCE: THE BODY AS LANGUAGE (1974), reprinted in Milan: Skira, 2000.
9. For a still useful book on the art of this period in Britain, see Edward Lucie-Smith, THE ART OF THE SEVENTIES, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980.
10. Antony Gormley in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, unpublished interview, 2019.
11. Antony Gormley in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, ANTONY GORMLEY: SECOND BODY, Paris: Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, 2015, p. 121.
12. Antony Gormley, ON SCULPTURE, London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015, p. 196.
13. For Gormley on this, see 'Antony Gormley in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist', ANTONY GORMLEY: SECOND BODY, Paris; Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, 2015, p. 128.