

ANTONY GORMLEY

STUART MORGAN - THE GENESIS OF SECRECY

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In Antony Gormley's work existence itself mediates between perception and truth. Inherent in his objects is a mystery which unwrapping fails to dispel and insulation only heightens. Mercilessly flayed or hermetically sealed, they resemble units from some black-hole universe where matter has been turned inside-out. Stripping and extension, the adding and subtracting of skins is so persistent a feature that it is tempting to decide that it is absence, not presence, to which he renders homage. Spectators are invited to witness a continuous drama of disclosure and concealment in which (paradoxically) nothing is hidden, nothing revealed.

The most enigmatic of Gormley's early sculptures, *Open Door*, 1975, a door hanging in mid-air, looks like an object lesson. More like a window, it can be seen through; it has been sliced lengthways into equal strips, then each strip turned through 90° and laid flat. Instead of using items from everyday life or composing with abstract elements, Gormley abstracts from mundane items, situating them in some middle ground. Modification of context becomes characteristic. In *Bread Line*, 1978/9, which he calls a "redescription", a loaf of bread is spread across the floor one bite at a time. For *Flat Tree*, 1978, he has cut the trunk of a conifer into slices of equal thickness. Then, starting with the smallest, the pieces have been laid in a spiral so that they touch. The distance from centre to periphery of the work, the totality looking like a trunk formation of its own, constitutes something equivalent to a map of the growth of the tree. A new tree has come into existence.

Relocation, rearrangement, redescription. . . The artist draws the material to him, makes it relate to his own concerns, then sets it free once more after a gesture of "making strange" (Shklovski's *ostranenie*). Unlike Pygmalion, urging matter into his own image, Gormley - more mortal than demigod - can be seen as an Adamic figure adrift in a new world, finding ways to cope with the fullness and particularity of existence.

Adamic? Though it may be true that we think by naming, as Hegel remarked, Gormley's pieces furnish an argument for perceiving most clearly by withholding names, allowing things to become eloquent while suspending that closure which definition entails. Such suspension would permit quite different affinities to come into play, and with them other classification systems. While pure sorting underlies one type of Post-Minimalist art in America, in Britain the equivalent process acquires an anthropological bias. Examining taxonomies can indeed be a way of gauging the cultural assumptions from which social actions spring. Take the case of the Asmat Indians of New Guinea.

"Parrots and squirrels are famous fruit-eaters . . . and men about to go headhunting feel a relationship to these beings and call themselves their brothers. . . (because of the) parallelism between the human body and a tree, the human head and its fruits."

The "untamed thinking" Lévi-Strauss describes is not a prerogative of primitive peoples; it is also the domain of artists and structural anthropologists. In the sets of lead-encased objects - *Fruits of the Earth*, 1978-79, *Natural Selection*, 1981, and *Land, Sea and Air I*, 1977-79 - Gormley devises both systems and diagrams for those systems. *Fruits of the Earth* (a loaded pistol, a bottle of wine and a machete covered in successive layers of lead) comments on the hedonism of the title; pleasure thrives on piracy, survival at all costs. Tripartite structures like this crop up frequently in Gormley's work. "Three", he explains, "is the beginning of infinity", the lowest possible number with which a universal meaning can be adumbrated. Another favored form is parataxis, making a string of successive units. *Natural Selection* is one such sequence, moving towards organic growth despite frequent interruptions. It includes opposing male and female shapes, man-made and natural objects - a carrot and a chisel, a vibrator and a banana. At the centre a grenade and a goose-egg, tokens of destruction and creation, show how far the viewer's capacity for acceptance is stretched in this parodied evolutionary diagram which gives equal emphasis to life and destruction. Deadened, muffled, hidden, but not completely changed, shapes reach out to each other, suggesting unexpected family resemblances. Far more surprising relations are envisaged in a drawing called *Exercise between Blood and Earth*, 1979-81. The outline of a running figure is restated both inside and outside the limits of its body, so that as the plan widens and definitions are lost, an almost perfect circle is described. The whiff of vitalist philosophy is unavoidable. Reciprocity between "blood" and "earth" is celebrated as forces radiate from one to the other. Man, Gormley has often observed, is "Earth above Ground". His work has put the idea into action.

Early physical tests - like removing dried mud in a spiral and throwing it behind him until an area had been uncovered that could hold his body - presaged later concerns. For *Bed*, 1980-81, he consumed his own volume of sliced bread. The hieratic appearance of the result is deceptive; since its two concavities are identical the bed should be imagined halved, hinged and heaved shut like a tailor-made tomb. After three years of oriental travel Gormley returned to England in 1973 and experimented with plaster cases for bodies. Around 1980 he resumed this procedure, having moulds made from his own body. Relationships between an art of place and one of objects considered as insides and outsides are verifiable in psychological terms.

"The fact that the concept of place implies an inside and an outside makes it clear that the place is situated within a larger context and cannot be understood in isolation. Any place, in fact, contains directions and openings. Primitive terms for spatial relationships suggest that the body itself, with its personal dimensions of above-below, before-behind and right-left, is the source of a psychophysical system of co-ordinates." [H. Werner, *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development*]

By complicating the technique involved in earlier ensembles, the figure groups become correlatives for general existential meanings. *Land, Sea and Air II*, 1983, for example, in which the husks of human beings have holes at the nose, eyes and ears, brings together various forms of identity: postures, elements, sensory organs, places. Gormley describes his concern as "the way in which an element can be associated with a posture and then the posture can be associated with a means of perception." Yet his postures themselves are ambiguous. The "ways" in *Three Ways*, 1981 - 82, are holes in the carapace of the figure, a second skin now, like armour: at the anus, mouth and penis. Though the forms are emblems of birth, life and death, the "dead" or supine figure displays an erect penis and the "foetus" is open-mouthed, while "life" combines contemplation and provocation. Expressionless, undramatic surrogates for the artist's skin, divided to resemble contour maps, they convey states of mind and being. In addition, they

are sculptural metaphors for physical attributes, seen always as the result of intrusion or extrusion (the parts have individual titles: Passage, Mould and Hole). Gormley speaks of Hole, the yogic "life" element, as a kind of "volcano". And just as the decontextualised shapes in *Three Bodies*, 1981 - a pumpkin, a shark and a rock - were distinct but complementary (animal, vegetable and mineral; male, female and bisexual; a sphere, a cone and a cylinder; attack, defence and neutrality) the bodies in *Three Ways* (standing, lying and crouching) contribute to a significance which results from their unison; it occurs between them.

The figure groups take hollowness for granted. Though the body is viewed as a container, it contains only vacancy. "It gives itself space, it indicates space and that space is its subject", says the artist. *Night*, 1983, one of his most recent single figure works, addresses itself to the parallel between a sense of being within one's own body when the eyes are closed and a sense of space when gazing into the sky at night. "The dome of the skull is comparable with the dome of the sky."

Gormley tells of bringing a granite boulder from Ireland and, for no real reason, covering it with lead, then later cutting off the case. "That was the point of realisation. There was the thing and there was a case that was free of the thing but was an image of it." His excitement is hard to fathom. The difference between a boulder and a mould of a boulder, crucial to Gormley himself, may strike us as no more than a choice of physical properties. Yet these imply orientations - inward or outward - which transcend the visual. Going through the motions of a process of penetration while revealing nothing may indicate that the "mystery" itself is elsewhere. It is with the skin. "With" the skin, not "in" it. In literal terms, nothing lies "in" that skin. Indeed, in Gormley's aesthetic, nothing lies "inside" anything. *Full Bowl*, 1977-78, is a bowl where the inside is described by the same means as the outside; there is no final edge. Just as wrapping and unwrapping often achieve the same result for Gormley, and the effect of one technique can turn suddenly into its opposite, the Bowl when "full" reads from the centre out, as a dramatisation either of absence or of stilled action, like ripples in a pond. Or, consider his game in the work in which a sliced milk bottle is "filled" or "emptied" by means of rings cut at different heights on bottles displayed in series along the floor. Its title is *Form and Content*, the dichotomy for which he reserves his greatest scorn.

The skin on a body or the meniscus on water are physical manifestations of Gormley's actual mystery: the edge between definitions; the place where surface begins or ends, since that place is one and the same; the line of division between mapping and real existence. Ponder this and you ponder many centuries of Western philosophy, as perhaps Leonardo did when he mused on the edges of human flesh in art. All of the music of the period in question seems to depend on the start of the notes, the moment when the violin bow hits the string . . . Regard the focus, the mystery in Gormley, as that moment, that edge, visible or invisible. It is a place where nothing occurs, a moment of stillness where measurement begins or ceases, where matter itself does and does not "matter".

Essentially this is a meditation on origins and on the power of art to originate. Martin Heidegger, whose thinking Gormley's parallels in certain important respects, thought of the art work as a healing instrument, mediating between dualisms of subject and object, outside and inside, being and thinking, returning us, if we act on the hints it offers, to the healthier totality of pre-Socratic thought. Gormley's insistence on not "using up" his materials; his definition of man as earth above ground; his tendency to want to regard art as more and more a latter-day invitation to the sacred and the metaphor of an "eternal present" in which he wants it to exist are all coincidences of interest. Most stubborn of all in both men is the stress laid on sheer being, the concrete existence of the work considered as physics, in Heidegger's terminology "The power that emerges...the process...of emerging from the hidden."

Adikia, another of Heidegger's coinages from the Greek, might well describe Gormley's sculpture between 1975 and the present. It means existing in a present state of juncture. Gormley himself has described his art as located between "origin" and "becoming".

Thinking back on it, *Open Door* was a prophetic work. Brancusi made a portal. So did Robert Morris. Hoisted aloft, out of reach of function, Gormley's door more nearly resembled Duchamp's, opening both ways at once. *Open Door* divided space like a solid edge. Yet edges have no properties, need no concrete form. Division between categories, skin around flesh, "betweenness", now matters so much to Gormley that in retrospect this simple work looks like a manifesto for an art of the liminal.
