SANDY NAIRNE - SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON - THE WORK OF ANTONY GORMLEY

From ANTONY GORMLEY, Stadtische Galerie Regensburg, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, Germany, 1985

'I believe myself to be a return in sculpture to the human outlook, without in any way sinking back into the flabby sentimentalising or the merely decorative that went before . . . The deeply intimate and human were always sought by me, and so wrought, that they became classic and enduring.' - Jacob Epstein, 1940

I

Writing in 1940 Epstein felt caught between two opposing forces. On one hand he had little sympathy for a forceful modernist style of sculpture epitomised in the near-abstract work of Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. On the other hand he felt hounded by an unsympathetic public that poured scorn on every major new sculpture as it was unveiled, each regarded as outlandishly distorted or brutally 'primitive'. Epstein's solution to this dilemma, his argument for a return to the 'human outlook', proved to be prophetic of the cultural climate after the War. For twenty years after 1940 figurative and humanist work held critical sway, and only after 1960 did the leading sculptors return to making abstract, constructed sculptures. 1981 has some parallels with 1940. After making sculptures formed from objects for some years himself, and at a time when work made from discarded urban objects and utensils was at the height of critical fashion, Antony Gormley decided to make the human figure the principal subject of his work. Art that deals only with objects is never going to use art to its fullest potential. Objects cannot talk about experiences - they can talk about knowledge, about ideas, about culture . . . but I don't think that they can carry feelings One of the factors that triggered this change was seeing Jacob Epstein's carving Elemental in an exhibition that year at the Whitechapel Art Gallery.

The desire of an artist to express directly personal feelings and experiences is currently not uncommon, the belief in a world of progress in which it was assumed that traditional representation could no longer convey the modern spirit, is over. Given this disillusionment with the utopian aims of a scientific and technocratic society, as starvation, pollution and warfare continue unabated, it is hardly surprising that while some artists tackle these issues directly, others are thrown back on themselves and their own more immediate knowledge of the world. But whereas so much of that 'direct experience' is conveyed in consciously expressionist styles, particularly in the field of painting, Antony Gormley's more rational and controlled approach is highly distinct. His intention, since 1981 is to make sculptures that correspond with his own experiences and feelings, and that in a sense carry his view of the world and our place in it. At the same time he hopes that they may act as a vehicle for spectators' ideas and imagination; that they may activate an empathetic set of feelings through bodily expression. How Gormley reached this point in 1981, the background to his thinking, and how he has extended since then, are the subjects of this essay.

II

'For me sculpture uses physical means to talk about the spirit, weight to talk about weightlessness, light to refer to darkness - a visual means to refer to things that cannot be seen.' - Antony Gormley

Antony Gormley's work is considered here in three phases or areas of work that are roughly chronological. Such a division is not intended to sever references between different work from different years, but simply to provide a structure for discussion. The first, more analytical phase starts with works made while Gormley was a student at the Slade School of Fine Art from 1977. In these sculptures an appreciation of the sculpture includes a recognition of the process of its production, and that process is indicative of the general theme of transformation. The title of Land, Sea and Air I helps reveal that each element might be present within the three identical rounded lead forms; the shape taken from a single stone, itself formed by the action of the other two elements. This contrast between internal matter and external covering is further exemplified in Fruits of the Earth, where the muzzle of a revolver is ominously exposed at the centre of a fruit-like form made of lead wrappings. Later one learns that the revolver is loaded. The revolver, the machete and the wine bottle seem to depict 'jungle life', perhaps a metaphor for life in the art world, or even for survival in some drastic future time. The objects are wrapped, and disguised, and might still exist within the sculpture, a question that was extended in Three Bodies of 1981. The forms of a shark, a rock and a pumpkin (animal, mineral and vegetable) are sealed for ever in lead encasements, but, paradoxically, the interiors are filled with earth. The immutability of lead contrasts with the transitory nature of bread, used to make several works. Breadline first attracts the eye as a bold ribbon across the floor, only close-to does one get a sense of bread as primal matter - the stuff that sculptors are made of. The bread's decay seems imminent, acting to prevent its own survival as sculpture. The wood pieces from this time are more structural. Flat Tree seems, as in the work of Richard Long, to involve gathering of disparate parts. But this is a more deliberate act: the trunk of a small tree cut into thin slices and then ordered in a spiral. A tree laid out flat. The first view of Bed similarly masks the process of making. At first a view of a pile of standard, sliced, white bread, and then emerging two concave half-bodies, literally eaten out of the stacks of bread. Seen by some as two half moulds that might be closed together, it might alternatively be seen as more tomb-like and stately, a single object, a negative version of the recumbant church effigies of the Middle Ages. Instead of being commemorated in stone, Gormley's figures are the very image of mortality. They are the reverse of Carl Andre's phrase of sculpture being a 'cut in space'; there is a ghostliness to the human outlines that makes the empty spaces feel inhabited. If the bread works make permanent images from insubstantial matter, the works in lead use substantial matter to transform and eventually equalise, objects. The process of transformation is analytical in its ordering of images and material.

III

'If you get a sense of extension, or constriction, or vulnerability, or tentativeness, or generosity, or meanness, or fear, or love, or all those things, so much the better, for I think all those things are in the work.' - Antony Gormley

If the first phase of work included a rational ordering of the world, both 'natural' and human, the second introduced the artist's body in order to make some equivalent for his experience of the world. It was this new 'subject' which, in 1981, took him away from the use of objects. The figures are made as moulds of Gormley's body, plaster forms the base and then lead is laid over in sections, beaten into place and soldered at the joints. The greatest control over the exact pose of the figure is given by this method. Once the particularities and peculiarities of the flesh have been lost (there are no

separate toes, fingers or facial features) then this pose is the key determinant in the 'look' or image of the figure. The process of production provides, like a photograph, some direct relation with an event. Like a photograph also, the relation between image and original is never quite as simple as it first appears. The sculpture is a transformed version of a body, not a replica.

Three Ways was the first group of human figures made in lead. Each figure is hollow, a key difference from the lead covered objects described above, and hollow with the space where the artist's body once was. Not only hollow, but with a clearly visible hole at the uppermost point of each figure. The figure in foetal position, Mould, has an open mouth, Hole has an opening at the anus, and the lying figure, Passage, an opening at the end of the erect penis. In Land, Sea and Air II the nose, eyes and ears are open. In all of them the holes, the join between inside and out, stress the figure as a skin, a covering, and mark the physical division between self and other, and between one's psyche and the world. This piercing of the skin or carapace was further stressed in Lift of 1983, where a standing lead figure is riddled with holes, the hand poised by each hip as if it were ready to fly away. The motif re-emerges in the Untitled figure of 1984, made of soldered copper plates, which hangs directly on the wall and gives a strong sense of St. Sebastian's gory martyrdom.

'I use lead for the following reasons. Lead is an insulator, it's the most malleable and the densest metal. It has the capability of taking on a form and also holding it; it's completely impenetrable visually, radioactively.' - Antony Gormley

It is also deadly. It seems to suck in all other colours, to encapsulate them in its funereal greyness. The lead skins of Gormley's figures make them underlying and permanent, no longer like humans: featured and frail. The joins in the lead sheets provide a strange reference grid, as if the figures had survived an accident simulation, or as the seams in the clothing devised for nuclear survival. The horizontal lines in Three Calls or Peer emphasize the unhuman, the robotic, gently contrasting with the completeness of the image. The joins, left proud of the lead, also clarify the production of these skins, held together over the original human skin that was inside.

'The body has to stand as an unexpressive whole. I'm using the whole body as if it were a face. Gestures have to involve the whole body. There has to be an integrity to the final form.' - Antony Gormley

These figures have strictly formal poses, there are no distracting parts, no misleading or dominating gestures. It is the creation of an image, a feeling, a gestalt, that is important. The integrity of relations between the parts of each body is parallel to the integrity of the relations between the figures as a group. Three Places emphasizes a possible sequence of actions, while Three Calls displays a greater independence of action and expression in the separate figures. But unlike the more recent works, these figures discourage anything but a circular viewing; installed so that you study an individual figure but are always led on to be aware of them as a group. While two figures are always an opposition, three is the beginning of many.

What do they express or represent? They are not symbolic in the religious sense. Gormley's own philosophy shares many of the aspirations of a religious sensibility (he was educated as a Catholic and later spent three years in India taking an interest in Buddhist philosophy), but the works are not intended, as in religious statues or icons, to stand in for something else, a power or a belief. They are based on Gormley's conviction that physical experience is a primary force, and they pose the conundrum of being a mind located within a body that is subject to physical and temporal laws. He argues that this physical experience is held in common by all humans and he contrasts it with the social and cultural experience that otherwise divides them. Each of the figures is a celebration of an aspect of that physical experience. Each viewing might be a comparison between the artist's feeling and the spectator's empathetic reaction. The contemplation of the figures provides a testing ground for the memory of physical experience.

Night Box (inspired in part by a crouched figure by William Blake) and Plumb are all figures crouching on the floor with their heads between their knees. Insulated and isolated they all convey concentrated thought and separation from the world and the spectator. There is a certain concentration in the stone carvings of figures from the Twenties and Thirties. But their weight, their stoniness and solidity, contributes to an outward look, often staring distantly, that makes them impenetrable. Similarly we feel the weight and solidity of Gormley's lead figures, but, by contrast, they look inward. Each sculpture invites occupation. It is complete when, as Gormley puts it, they are 'inhabited': like a building can be inhabited, but by the imagination or the mind. This 'invasion' of the sculpture, or identification by the spectator, may be more extreme in these crouching works in part because they are sexless, and in part because they depart so radically from any classical postures. The identification, however applies to all of Gormley's hollow figures. As Lynne Cooke puts it, 'Gormley's work is true to experience and feeling as distinct from actual observation'.

The interior correspondences between different parts of a work are most evident in Peer of 1983/84. The figure looks down and peers at its own erect penis. 'At an analytical level you've got the conscious mind looking at a reflex action. On another level it's the two ends of the spinal cord looking at each other.' - Antony Gormley

No longer is the male artist enacting social relations of power, moulding the image of the passive female body, but quizzically examining the mechanics of his own sexual arousal. Not just the mechanics, but also the symbol of patriarchal power. Traditional erotic art is thus undermined. The circularity of the interior gaze invites identification from a male viewer, but his is no celebration; a sense of oddness and surprise being the dominant emotion.

Address is the work that leads to the bodily distortions of the later figures. Here a figure leans forward, hand flat on thighs, and simply sticks out its tongue. It is an impertinence, an impertinence against the spectator and an impertinence against the 'chaste, grave and serene art' of sculpture. Like Peer the body is not quite in its expected shape, and the apparent removal of the genitals in Address implies the possibility of some bizarre transplant to the mouth. Sexuality might be implied to be spoken; a coincidence of body-language and spoken-language . This work marks the boundary within which the figure, in transformed format, could still serve Gormley's ideas and remain close to the ordinary shape of the body.

IV

The start of the third, more dream-like, phase of work is denoted by two pieces made in 1984, Tree and Mind. Tree was subsequently matched with another figure, Field, made in 1985.

'The works came from a real excitement about trying something new; both came from drawings. They both have a physical believability, together with a memory or reflection of certain feelings one has. An equivalent for feelings. To make concrete the life that goes on inside the head one can't stay within classic proportions.' - Antony Gormley

The figures are absurd and logical at the same time. In part they emerged from a dream world, but in part they represent the feeling of looking over

the horizon or the feeling of being able to reach wonderfully wide. In viewing they give a flicker effect as the eye jumps back and forwards between head and shoulders and between hand and shoulder, unable to rest and left strangely unfocussed. Each figure both is and isn't a body proper: questioning the stereotype of a 'normal' body. 'It allowed me to use the language of the body to talk about the division of mind and body.' - Antony Gormley

That division, and the connections across it, has been the central study of generations of psychoanalysts. The recalling of dream experience has been inevitably a close area of attention. From dreams we remember experiences that feel 'real' at the time of the mental activity, and yet follow none of the rules of space or sequential time that govern what we call 'reality'. When Gormley made Mind, a fourteen by nine foot lead 'cloud', hung from the ceiling, he made the ultimate dream object. An absurd reversal of weightlessness, ominous in its overhead presence, it follows no 'laws' of sculpture and bears only the most schematic relationship to its counterpart in the skies. Like the lead-skinned figures it invites imaginative invasion. Mind was produced at the same time that Gormley started to use terracotta as well as lead. Terracotta has a warmth that contrasts with the coolness of the metal. Its manipulation leaves marks quite different from the flattened quality of beaten lead; it empasizes the hand as tool.

'Terracotta is good because it is mud. It seems a good job for a sculptor to try and make earth carry feeling.' - Antony Gormley

Home has a terracotta house placed over the head of a lying figure, giving it a new and Lilliputian scale. The outstretched arms of Work carry clay. Here is the image of the artist holding the potential for art, ready to form the 'stuff' of sculpture. But the static pose is so formal that the work recreates the polarities of art as a form of artisan production and art as some divine inspiration.

The Beginning, The Middle and The End gives no indication as to which part is which, but the expectation of narrative is strong. Not narrative as story-telling, but narrative just as connected events. The terracotta figure looks backward, against the forward step of the lead figure that supports it. The long shadow, falling ahead, implies a place on the earth. Many connections can be made, but perhaps the strongest suggestion is that the terracotta figure is the conscience or memory of the larger figure, certainly a weight on its mind. The title comes from a saying of Aristotle, and this puzzle demands more of the viewer than the previous singular encounter. A double encounter is created with Man Asleep. A lying figure is turned away from a stream of small clay figures walking past: a sort of populace.

'The paradox... is that you have a space that derives from a real body in real time - like a photograph - yet it refers to dream time which is the obverse. The little clay figures are totally fictional both in scale and shape, but they show people walking and have a kind of sculptural reality; they also have a manufactured reality, you can see the touch of my hands.' - Antony Gormley

Here is less formal, less structured ground in which ideas have been sown; perhaps by definition there is less clarity of meanings, and a wider resonance is possible. The 'dream' may suggest a political mass, consciousness of unity, perhaps a protest or a march from work. Either way its suggestiveness feels very pertinent to a culturally divided Britain in which the right to protest and the right to work seem increasingly to be under threat.

V

'The fact that man is daily better equipped to destroy himself and the world, and increasingly less in control of his actions is very much in my mind. I am aware of the fragility of our world, of the difficulty people have living together. I think in some way my work faces up to these things. I think that any work that tries to deal with the condition of man is implicitly political; however, the work is the response of trying to deal with those things and doesn't stem from the reading of any political ideology.' -Antony Gormley

The stereotypical figure of the sculptor is often either the traditional artist wresting a figurative image from the clay or stone, or the modernist fabricating the vital form from a random collection of materials. In both these caricatures the artist's ordering of matter, creating order out of chaos, fits neatly with the male view of the man as the essentially ordering half of the species. Antony Gormley's work gives a different perspective from this false view. Even when not taken from his own body, the animals or objects are moulded around the thing or a replica of it; they are not fashioned or styled out of inert matter, but produced through this process of transformation. Even when the body is extended in a sculpture, it has some relation to Gormley's own, providing an autobiographical proximity between subject and object. There is none of the 'distance' from the subject that allowed the male mist to contribute to the mythologies of the patriarchy.

'There is the self that is known only through relations with others and there is the silence of personal truth which is universal and has no face. We do not know what our faces look like.' - Antony Gormley

Gormley's production of sculpture is not limited to making studio works. He has never been entirely enamoured with the white gallery space, and sees it as only one location among many. He has always hoped that the work could exist as part of people's lives, and has accepted several public commissions, one in 1984 for a Peace Park and a current proposal for a monument to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Several other works have been made for public locations, including a figure cut in the stone face in a quarry at Portland, and are evocative and accessible to a range of audiences, whatever the different layers of philosophical implication. 'I am tired of art about art. The spectator completes and. . . becomes the work by the reflective action of relinking the work with the world.' - Antony Gormley

'We traffic in signs and signals of face and body, image and language. It is all coded and influenced by the cultural milieu in which it exists. I am interested in direct and encoded experience - I do not want to deny contemporary urban culture, but I feel my work acts as a foil to it.' - Antony Gormley

Antony Gormley's view of our present society is no romantic or isolated protest, but part of a widespread unease felt in the 1980s. His proposal of paying closer attention to our physical knowledge, the location of mind within body, relates closely to the distrust that he feels for knowledge pursued, undirected, for its own sake. His works are a celebration of human capabilities as well as an exposition of human experience.

'When you are cold, tired, happy, joyful - when you dive into the sea or climb up to the top of a mountain these feelings and sensations, emotional and physical, are not the product of knowledge but of experience.' - Antony Gormley

The excitement of the present work is to see that experience not bounded by the conscious mind, but exploring the imagination and the sub-

conscious. That exploration is always linked to a sense of hope, a positive belief that art can reestablish its place in society, a belief held by Epstein in the 1940s but one of even greater importance today. But Gormley's utopianism is grounded in the down-to-earth realisation that a new place for art implies new attitudes to art, and, importantly, implies new art as well.

'The work is a point between origin and becoming. Like a seed, between death and the new life there is a point of stasis and silence, a time for reflection. Sculpture can use that time.' - Antony Gormley

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