

# ANTONY GORMLEY

## OYSTEIN HJORT - THE SILENT LANGUAGE OF THE BODY - ANTONY GORMLEY'S NEW SCULPTURE

From ANTONY GORMLEY, Louisiana, Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark, 1989

"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

Late last year, Antony Gormley finished a new sculpture which he titled *As Above So Below*. He originally intended for the sculpture to stand, but then turned it upside down. Now it hangs, hovering a bit off the floor. The rigid body, with extended arms and slightly spread legs, does not have the pose of a fall. It is a figure in a stage of strange, unexpected serenity (considering its upside-down position); it seems as if it localises another - forgotten or unknown form of balance. It seems to take possession of its world in the same way as Leonardo's famous figure which - inscribed in the perfect figures of geometry, the circle and the square - interprets Vitruvius's conceptions of the harmonious human body, whose proportions lie behind all other proportions and relations in the world.

These relations are hardly without significance for Gormley, whose work in recent years expresses reflections on the body as a microcosm, and the energies which move this microcosm. The title (and titles are always carefully considered, and play an important role for Gormley) is a quotation from Paracelsus (1493-1541), not only one of alchemy's great figures, but also an innovator in medicine.

For Paracelsus, man was indeed a microcosm within the great universal unity. It was his view, for example, that human illness could be traced back to a breakdown in the balance between the body and the world around it. The quotation from Paracelsus, consequently, perpetuates the dream of a universal order: the earthly reflects the heavenly; the harmony that rules above us must also be present here.

We can compare *As Above So Below* with two variations on the Vitruvian figure in Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books On Occult Philosophy*, one of the 16th century's most famous works on magic and the occult. Here the human figure is inscribed in a square, on the one hand, and in a circle, on the other. In the first, the diagonals from the corners of the diagram define the genitals as the actual center of the figure (and the composition). A cross at the navel emphasises man's place in the great flow of generations and time. In the second drawing from the same work, the figure is inscribed in a circle, a triangle, and a pentagram, but the center of this complex composition is once again the genitals. The body's limbs correspond to certain heavenly bodies: for example, Mars is seen above the head, the sun is placed at the site of the navel, and the moon at the genitals.

Gormley studies external and internal conditions, and in his works from the 1980s there is an interchange between action/non-action and between extroversion/introversion. Further consideration, however, makes it clear that tensions and energies are to a decisive degree aimed inward, and *As Above So Below*, too, is primarily an expression of an interest in the body as a microcosm. The genitals are the center of the sculpture (as they are in the illustrations in Agrippa's work), and the axial connection between the genitals and the brain are delineated graphically on the body by the vertical soldering seam. In this way, Gormley confirms the idea of a cyclical exchange of energies between spirit and matter, between the psyche and sexuality. Free and chained energy are complementary, and converge - perhaps - in a Jungian libido. For Gormley, in any case, one cannot exist without the other.

In the original standing version, the sculpture built upon and expanded the earlier *Peer* (1983-84), in which a male figure seems absorbed in contemplating his own erect penis. Perhaps this is an expression of a germinal understanding of the powers that - behind the politics of the body, its social organisation - link spirit and matter. " . . . It's the two ends of the spinal cord looking at each other", as Gormley has expressed it. The humorous formulation - and the sculpture itself, naturally - precisely confirms a perspective which can be expounded with a view to both cultural history and psychoanalysis. Behind the body's physical form lies its symbolic life, dynamic currents moving back and forth between centers of energy. "Cerebral is genital".

With pieces like this, Gormley places himself outside the tradition of modernism where the work of art is considered as autonomous and self-referential. It does not mean that he adheres to another tradition which goes back to the Middle Ages and transcribes the body and its functions as metaphors or different sets of moral concepts. In his dissertation *On Sculpture* from the end of the 1760s, Johann Gottfried Herder uses metaphors from nature for his description of the female body, while man's is described in loaded moral terms.

Gormley does not moralise. With great consistency, on the contrary, he gives form to a number of relationships of meaning which are partly "introvert" - deal with inner, physical and psychic, connections, and partly "extrovert" - deal with the connection between the body and space in the widest sense. The introvert may be exemplified by *Vent* (1983), the extrovert by *Address* (1984).

Throughout our culture, the body has been at the center of such deliberations. It is rejected and it is accepted (and the latter probably never so much as in the narcissistic body culture of our age), but the whole time consciousness penetrates the body. And the body is always present in our consciousness. Between ascetic (or Platonic) rejection and hedonistic affirmation, the body is present in society's space, defines it and is defined by it. Our conception of it also embraces an understanding of the individual in relation to others. This experience must also be fundamental for Gormley - and for our understanding of his work. With a certain justification we can say that his work emerges from a recognition of the interaction between body and society that is closely linked with that of the anthropologist, who claims that the human body can always be seen as an image of society and that the forces and dangers that lie in the social structure are seen reflected in a smaller version in the body:

" . . . There can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension. Interest in its apertures depends on the preoccupation with social exits and entrances, escape routes and invasions. If there is no concern to preserve social boundaries, I would not expect to find concern with bodily boundaries. The relation of head to feet, of brain and sexual organs, of mouth and anus are commonly treated so that they express the relevant patterns of hierarchy." In other words: we must, as Mary Douglas adds, recognise "the social wealth of symbols which the body possesses".

Antony Gormley wants to take art back to society and place it where a dialogue with social processes also leads to a criticism both of the mentality of

the age and of "modernity" as the framework within which art functions today. He wants, as he says, to "open a field" where one can experience and reflect upon what it means to be human. What differentiates him from most other British artists who made their breakthrough a few years ago is precisely his use of the human figure and the significance which he gives it as an instrument and expression of both individually psychological and universal social processes.

Gormley does not, however, consider himself a figurative sculptor. Earlier works - for example *Land, Sea and Air II* - were executed several times: it was a laborious process to get away from sculpture in a classical or conventional sense. All the while Gormley was confronted with the view of others that a work had to be representative, had to have "a likeness". He generalised and sought a symbolically charged alternative to a lifelike modelled human figure.

The sculptures, fiberglass reinforced plaster moulds of his own body covered with a "skin" of lead, take on, through this skin and the empty space that it contains, the dimensions that intensify their meaning. They become boxes or vessels for the content we help give them. They function as symbols for a set of relations of meaning that are aimed outward and inward. Each sculpture is in a sense self-biographical in its point of departure, but the self-biographical is absorbed by its conceptual and universal human dimension. Gormley gives shape to his ideas with his own body; with it, ideas and experience are given form, become an object. The personal and individual are encapsulated in the universal.

The sculptures are deprived of the signals that the eyes or mimicry would give. They express themselves with an elementary body language which confirms their commitment and presence within certain intimate and social zones. Their relationship to space - let us say: the acceptance of a necessary architectonic context - is manifested through the "seams" on the sculpture's skin, the marks of the soldering torch. The body's landscape is mapped by their network, which is always vertical/ horizontal and as a result helps keep the body in relation to architecture. It can be given a stronger symbolic meaning, for example, when the seams measure out the symmetrical body's two axes and fix them in a cross on the chest. In a wider sense, these seams are also the grid that society, with its established conventions, categories, and demands, presses over the body, inhibiting and restraining it. It is a social and cultural system of coordinates, one could say, which symbolises the body's forced incorporation into the social order - in corpore!

This is an especially clear feature of the sculptures which are active or interact with their surroundings - the "theatrical ones", Gormley calls them. They confront us and force us to take part in a dialogue. Their presence reinforces our awareness of the space around us at the same time as we recognise the body's simple language and try to penetrate the darkness within the membrane of lead and try to fill it or empty it of content. Gormley likes to think of them as little pieces of night inserted in light; as another kind of place, of space.

Gormley's works from the past two years have especially dealt with the double figure. It represents a meeting and a reflection, a confrontation between two or a splitting of one - comprise both the other and the self. In spite of its dichotomy, the double form has an integrity and the sculptures work especially because of their strange introversion. They do not appeal directly, but are self-absorbed. The distance between the two is that of intimacy, encompassing the erotic, comfort, protection.

Some of the new double figures can seem highly explicit in their depiction of sexuality. But the erotic meeting is not unequivocal. There can be an icy silence in the seeming embrace - and *Landing* (1988), two figures lying flat against one another with averted faces, measures with painful clarity the vacuum which estrangement wedges between the two. The sculpture is a symbol for loss; the concept of protection and comfort that also lies behind the phrase "to cling to one another" is undoubtedly expressed in the close physical relationship. But it is not redeeming. The sculpture is like a sarcophagus. Death follows love like a shadow.

Lead's attributes are linked to Saturn. In the long and strange processes of alchemy, it appears in the "Third Work" as a decoction that is blacker than black, a symbol, as it says in one of the fundamental texts, "of eternal death and regret for physical lethargy". Melancholy prevails where Saturn rules.

Gormley's use of a quotation from Paracelsus for one of his sculptures (*As Above So Below*) hints at a certain interest in the principles of alchemy. In this connection it has struck me that in referring to the beholder's relationship to the sculptures, Gormley has said that even though the sculptures are sealed in a way and unapproachable in their lead skin, they can be "re-inseminated with imagination". Here a word - inseminate - is used parallel with the concept, sperma in alchemy, where it stands for nature's life-giving element. It would be limited, however, to view Gormley's work only from this angle. Any interest in alchemy and occult philosophy that he might have above all reflects a living curiosity about the processes and thought systems that seek to establish a coherent and total view of the world. "We live in an age which provokes fear", says Gormley, "which is why there is also a strong element of survival in my recent works."

This also clarifies some of the religious - or more specifically, Catholic - aspects of this work, which, however, are unmistakable. His sculptures visualize and interpret such concepts as suffering and redemption from this angle. The sculptures for Londonderry, coupled figures back to back and with outstretched arms, have associations with the Crucifixion, but the cross lies as already noted as a more or less hidden matrix in many of the standing sculptures, where the network of seams imprints the sign of the cross on their chests.

The body carries another reality, or strives to transcend the world of reality. In *Bridge* (1985), the head is laid back and the face looks up. The figure is in fact the bridge that establishes a link with ultimate reality and binds the individual's present with Time itself. This also holds true for *Earth Above Ground* (1986-87), where the figure's almost weightless hovering is fixed by the cross made by the seams. A religiously infused feeling of redemption and salvation, so to say, uplifts Man, but he carries his preconditions and conditions with him. As the title indicates, Gormley wants to achieve not total liberation with the sculpture, but rather a unity.

This then is Gormley's utopian project: synthesis - between spirit and matter and between man's concrete reality and his universal unity. "Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite", wrote Søren Kierkegaard in *Sickness unto Death*, which has also attracted Gormley. The Despairing is deathly ill, just like those who submit to the age's fears without seeking alternatives. Gormley formulates a strategy for survival with his sculptures. He attempts exits and entrances, escape routes and invasions, which are not only social but existential as well.

In an age where every deeper meaning is fragmented and only appears superficially as a simulation or expresses itself indirectly through parody, he returns the human figure to his persistent and systematic study of "la condition humaine", to inscribe it thereafter in the formula which was also essential for Kierkegaard: that which "describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out... In relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it."

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