ANTONY GORMLEY

INTERVIEW WITH PIERRE TILLET

From ANTONY GORMLEY: BETWEEN YOU AND ME, Kunsthal Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 2008

Pierre Tillet: The human being in your sculptures is most often anonymous, even when you call one of your works ANOTHER SINGULARITY. Are you trying to erase individuality in your work?

Antony Gormley: I'm not seeking for the generic, the symbolic or the emblematic. I'm trying to renegotiate a connection between the subjective and the collective in the most direct way. Since I'm not interested in portraiture, the registration of the subjective is coming from under the skin rather than from the outside of it. Each work comes from a lived moment of a particular body, at a particular time, in a particular position [1]. This is its ontological origin. You can infer a number of philosophical propositions from this, of which the most important is that it is conceptual, but not ideologically motivated. It reaffirms subjective experience as the point of authenticity in human life.

PT: In his philosophy, Emmanuel Levinas makes the face of the other man the ground for ethics, in so far as it escapes possession, representation. In other words, the face of the other man eludes my power. Why can't we find any face in your sculptures?

AG: According to Levinas, we can only become completely ourselves when we register the fact that our actions and even our thoughts are given a context by being shared. What I try to give form to is the subjective experience of living behind our faces. Whether it's an actor on a stage or you and me sitting opposite to each other, I'm convinced that our faces belong more to the other than they do to ourselves. I agree with Emmanuel Levinas, even if the question of the face is not the real issue in my work. The issue for me is that it is impossible to make art that can truly be shared without acknowledging the body as a starting point of common experience. So I have to acknowledge the body and at the same time try to find a way of not representing it, or presenting it simply as an object. This is the reason why I'm not interested in the perfect copy, in representation. We probably never did it better than Mantegna or Masaccio, and anyway, photography does it perfectly.

PT: According to Luc Boltanski, "the question of the singularity of the persons have been long ignored in the realm of sociology." [2] In his opinion, the reason for this is that sociology had to get rid of psychology, regarded as too individual. Do you consider that you left psychology behind in your work?

AG: It's impossible to ignore psychology. I am not well versed in Lacanian psychology, but perhaps one could usefully apply it to my work. I underwent analysis for three years, four times a week, and I'm interested in anything that helps understand the relationship between memory, consciousness and character.

PT: One of the rare works in which there seems to rest some psychology is MOTHER'S PRIDE…

AG: This work is ironic it deals with the paradoxes of matter and mortality. This title comes from the name of the bread that was used. This bread has been made since 1936, and during the 70's and 80's it was the best-selling brand in the UK. It was supposed to represent clean, good, wholesome, pure, white bread for all classes. The irony is of course that this bread is not wholesome. It's the most industrially produced, chemically modified bread, made from purified white flour and that has little to do with a «mother's pride».

PT: To go back to Luc Boltanski, he also insists on the tension between singularity or uniqueness and similarity or substitutability. Identity, according to him, arises from the confrontation between these opposite poles. Could this dialectic be useful to understand such a work of art as FIELD (AMERICAN FIELD, EUROPEAN FIELD, ASIAN FIELD…)? The little body-surrogates that compose it are all different, singular and, at the same time, similar, substitutable…

AG: The two pieces from EVENT HORIZON that were on Waterloo Bridge [3] had a particular effect on the crowds who walked in dense streams. These still naked bodyforms reveal the tension between singularity and similarity by insisting on a measure that is not universal, it emphasises what we share and what makes us different. The situation is different with FIELD: the viewer stands in front of a space entirely occupied by the little body-

surrogates, he is stopped by it, and becomes a singular example in the face of a mass.

PT: There are two categories of pieces in your work. Some consist only in one or two, sometimes three, sculptures. Others are like groups of human beings, composed of hundreds or even thousands of sculptures. What leads you to the first or to the second category?

AG: I make works one at the time, which each time focus on what it feels like to be alive. But I realise you can't do that simply from the aspect of the singular object. You have to somehow make a context also out of objects and therefore out of place. My work acknowledges this as a time of mass production, and acknowledges the collective body. The urban condition of humanity is to live in a body shared with many bodies.

PT: The presence of the group is different in FIELD, ALLOTMENT and CRITICAL MASS II. In FIELD and ALLOTMENT, the links between each of the individual seem to be strong – stronger in FIELD than in ALLOTMENT. On the contrary, even if they share a similar problem – the difficulty or impossibility to stand – the statues which make up CRITICAL MASS II don't form a coherent set, geometrically speaking…

AG: The sculptures of CRITICAL MASS II share a common fate of an inability to stand – the whole of the work is about falling, is about those who don't fit and have no place in the collective body. The subject or the sub-text of CRITICAL MASS II is the loss of social order. In ALLOTMENT, it's a social order of architecture and in FIELD, it's a collective body that faces a common future – the little body-surrogates are all looking together in the same direction. CRITICAL MASS II is the most helpless thing I have ever made.

PT: You said once that CRITICAL MASS II "is an anti-monument evoking the victims of the twentieth century…"[4]

AG: You could say that ALLOTMENT and FIELD both refer to the dignity or order that you see in Arlington Cemetery and attempt to disrupt it. The twentieth century has been a time of mechanisation of war in which life becomes rubbish. CRITICAL MASS II has to do with how the rejected touch the ground – there is acceptance of inertia. There are twelve body positions which if put in a line would become a diagram of the ascent of man, from the state of fish-like amphibia to standing man. In spite of being thrown down and chaotically distributed, I have tried to express the dignity of each of these stages. Because they are fallen, this developmental structure is lost and you have to work quite hard to find it. CRITICAL MASS II is a key work for me. It combines the idea of a compressed moment of lived time and the idea of mechanical production, (there are twelve original bodyforms and they are each cast five times). Each one of these twelve pieces is an object that can have different values according to the way it falls. There is a crouching bodyform that literally can land on any one of its six sides and in each position, it feels different. There is a work that is like a mourning figure in a Renaissance crucifixion, which when inverted becomes like a jongleur, a kind of acrobat. I am very interested in this mutability.

PT:You sometimes describe your sculptures as cases. Does it mean that they are carrying something?

AG:They are tools for carrying nothing, nothing else than emptiness, shadow, darkness, carrying the condition of embodiment. They each carry the condition we all know. All you have to do is to shut your eyes when you are awake you are in the place that the bodyforms and the bodycases carry.

PT: Could we say that this emptiness is like an energetic void which is the condition of existence of the bodyform, which is animating the body? This emptiness could be what the ancient philosophers called the anima…

AG:Yes, the anima or the pneuma. The first works, like CRITICAL MASS, are a materialisation of the space inside the skin of the lead. It's still cast but this is what you are not allowed to see. This is a materialisation of that space, of that darkness. It's the same with Rodin's Âge de Bronze: this is actually a case, but he doesn't want us to think about his work as a bronze skin that is 6 millimeter thick, with a dark space inside. I wanted to make the void inside sculpture count in the lead cases: the darkness, the air contained within it is an important part of the material reality and the immaterial purpose of the work.

PT: The emptiness inside the sculptures of CRITICAL MASS II is not the same as it is inside the sculptures of ALLOTMENT…

AG: ALLOTMENT is a bit like SENSE or the other concrete works. You are given a chance to see the darkness, the life space of somebody. With the

lead body cases (apart from one or two that have holes at the eyes, the anus or whatever) you have no access to that.

PT: ALLOTMENT II is a constructed landscape made up of ‘buildings’ realised from the measurements of 300 different people. What do all those measurements mean?

AG: The measurements are the registration of the vital statistics of the people who participated. This is an obvious reference to all forms of social control that we accept as a necessary part of collective life. It is important that this is done very carefully: little differences between each individual are registered in the final sculpture. With the right attention, you can find the same level of difference and personality between each sculpture as you can see between each body surrogate in FIELD.

PT: The first thing I thought of when I saw ALLOTMENT was the Modulor of Le Corbusier…

AG: I think ALLOTMENT is much closer to Malevich and the Suprematist notion of ordered space. Le Corbusier lived at a time when modernism had not revealed its dark side. ALLOTMENT is a post-Auschwitz work.

PT: Another difference is that the Modulor is theoretical, it is an ideal form, while ALLOTMENT comes from the existence of real people.

AG: There is no ideal form in ALLOTMENT. This is very important: I start from a position of the highest value being given to the subject and not to the form. Even if the individual is determined by some specific conditions of measurement, nevertheless she is acknowledged and celebrated in her individuality. Even though every one of the rooms in ALLOTMENT has a number, which could be in a sense the diminishment of individual into statistics, whenever it is shown, you can go from the number to the name and then, if you want to - and some people do - you can find the face that connects with the name.

PT: How do you choose the position of every piece of ALLOTMENT II ?

AG: Even though this is not apparent at first, the relationship of male to female, of child to adult, is very carefully articulated in the distribution of the whole. There is no fixed distribution of the work, like there is no fixed distribution of FIELD. Every time we do it differently. But I always make a plan that simply indicates the size of the pieces, whether it’s big, middle or small, the orientation, whether the pieces are standing back to back, face to face, side to side, and the distribution within the block. There are usually twelve or fourteen blocks, with two avenues and four or five cross streets and every block has between fifteen and twenty-five pieces. For me it is very fascinating how the order and disorder of the distribution work with the living bodies, how people get lost and find their own places to stand and register not just spaces that are contained within the work, but also spaces that are created collectively between them.

PT: For me, ALLOTMENT also refers to the Bunker Archeology of Paul Virilio.

AG: I love bunkers and I saw many on the North Atlantic Wall, from Jutland to Normandy. Virilio’s assertion that the bunker is the ‘ur’ form of modernism in architecture is correct. In many ways, the early body case works were like bunkers. They reproduce in a small scale the amplification of tensions between inside and outside that are present in a bunker. A bunker has orifices, the anus, the ear, the eye, in solid concrete.

PT: Your sculptures are often cast from your own body. What is the reason for that?

AG: The reason I use my own body is that it’s very convenient, it’s very practical. I don’t have to force anybody to do something they don’t want to. I want to bear witness to my experience of the human condition not as an objective observer but as a participating experiencer and my body is the best tool, material, subject. The best case that I can argue is my own, because it’s the one that I’m working with everyday. You can argue that there is a narcissistic element in the project, but it is not the only thing to say. The issue is: how can you use the particularity of experience as a way of investigating a common condition? Since all human beings are embodied, to use the body that you have got as your laboratory is a good place to begin. And I would say that I’m still beginning. But since I began, I have also moulded hundreds of other people. When I was confident that I knew

what I was doing and how I was going to use these moulds in an effective way, I felt I could ask others to do what I had done myself.

PT: I saw a video in which two assistants were applying hessian and plaster on your body in order to cast it. It seems to be very hard to stand still until the materials get dry so that the mould is ready and you can get out of it. How can you do so?

AG: I use a meditative technique in order to establish a special relationship not just to the body and its activities, but to time. To get a good register in the work, you have to be in the right state of mind. The ritualised repetition of the engendering of the sculptures is part of the work as a whole. This has to do with finding balance, finding that form of concentration, finding acceptance, an acknowledgement of dependency, not just on consciousness and on the body itself but on the work of others, putting yourself into others hands. These things are interesting not as abstractions, but as part of the practice of sculpture.

PT: The relationship with time sometimes gets weird, like in the sculpture called PEER (1984), in which we see a man having an erection…

AG: The idea of bearing witness to the condition of being an animal with a reflexive mind is what this sculpture is about. All of the works are traps for time. The difference between PEER and Rodin's Kiss is that PEER is not an illustration of sexuality: it's the thing itself.

PT: For me, PEER was closer to Bruce Nauman than to Rodin's Kiss. What do you think about his work?

AG: I'm interested in the early pieces of Bruce Nauman, the work he made in the 60's walking in his studio, walking a line, playing the violin. He is close to the question: what does a man do when he's left on his own? You have to deal with your body in time and that's what Bruce Nauman does in the early videos. He questions the constructed human environment, he begins with light and abstracts wall from ground in the corridor pieces. One of my favourite Nauman works is the double cage piece. What I like about Nauman is the sense of experimentation and the complete withdrawal from formal concerns. The sickness of art in the late twentieth century was that issues of style and formal language have overtaken existential problems. As far as I'm concerned, art is useless unless it helps us deal with survival, psychologically and physically. It's useless unless it helps us investigate our predicament. I think Bruce Nauman was a pioneer in this, unlike Carl Andre whose work I admire, but which was clearly an attempt to find an industrial continuation of Brancusi's work.

Sometimes, the form of the body is present only in an allusive way in your work. FLOOR (1981), for example, consists in a rubber circle suggesting a stump, whose lines draw two footsteps in the center. In the same way, the BLANKET DRAWINGS (1983) register the sleeping body as an absence. In SENSE (1991) you cast a void in the form of a body inside a concrete block. Is there a link between these pieces?

Absolutely, they all talk about the skin as a boundary but try to allow us to go in it and out of it. FLOOR says: this is where a man might stand, where does he begin and end; can we think of him as a wave condition rather than a particle condition? The BLANKET DRAWINGS are about sleeping, swimming and drowning. The head that disappears out of the top is like an x-ray of the position of the body in the sleep. It becomes this floating body with the head as free as the sky. With SENSE, I'm just trying to do what I did with BLIND LIGHT [5]: suggest that there is a continuum between the internal condition of the body and space at large. You can see this as a cave in human form, in the shape of a blind man registering his environment.

PT: I also see SENSE as a work dealing with the missing body. Is the idea of the missing body the main issue of FREEFALL or the QUANTUM CLOUDS series?

AG: Rather than trying to reconcile the dialectic of mass and space by inversion or concentration (turning the body into a space is inversion, and turning the space of the body into a solid mass is concentration: the collapse of dialectic), perhaps a better way to deal with the body, which is more contemporary and closer to post-particle physics of David Bohm, Heisenberg and Niels Bohr. The search for the Quantum Theory of Gravity is a fascinating parallel field of research which has refused the dialectics of mass and spaces and applies the functions of a changing energy field to the mutability and interdependence of mind and matter. I agree with the Buddhist proposition that the western idea of an absolute individual with an everlasting soul has to be replaced by the idea of the individual as provisional, mutable and non-lasting. So, with the QUANTUM CLOUDS, FREEFALL and many of the recent works, the classical position of sculpture as an absolute object placed in space has been replaced by constructing a provisional energy field in space.

PT: You declared once that "it is an open question in the QUANTUM CLOUDS, whether the body is emerging from a chaotic energy field or the field

from the body…”[6]

AG: It’s important that this is not clear. We’ve just made the first void QUANTUM CLOUD, with no a body inside. It’s a void space in a trajectory field, which will be a very important point in the show.

PT: Another thing that surprised me was the duality of, on the one hand, the mechanical transcription or registration of the body and, on the other hand, the fact that it’s still an organic body. What do you think about that?

AG: In all of the experiments that I’m making at the moment the best are the ones where every element has its own position in space, its own rotation, its own way of connecting to the field matrix, but is essential to the structure. In other words, you can’t take it away without the structure disintegrating. At the same time, this element is also registering indexically this borderland, this limnality between presence and absence, between the possibility of something and the possibility of disappearance. Is this an emergence or a concentration? Is this about disintegration and entropy or origination? In the work I’m doing at the moment, I’m trying hard to allow every participating element – whether it’s a block, a ball, a linear element or a polygon – to be in the only place it can be in the total distribution but to have its individual identity. Now within the individual works, there is the same balancing of the particular and the universal that we discussed earlier in relation to FIELD or ALLOTMENT but that the tension between the chaotic and the ordered has increased with the development of different types of construction

PT: The structures of the QUANTUM CLOUDS, the DOMAIN SERIES, or the BLOCK WORKS can suggest a sort of mathematic modelisation transcribed in 3-D by an engineer…

AG: I like that idea of the model if you mean by this a blueprint or a proposal for the way that something might be built or understood. I like the idea that part of what art can do is not only make a picture or describe, but actually make a proposition about the underlying dynamics of structures. This is something that Paul Klee talked about in his Pedagogical Sketchbook, the idea that it’s not just what you see, it’s what you know, it’s not just what you know, it’s what you experience and it’s not just simply about giving a documentary account of the experience, it’s actually animating and conveying that experience so that it can become shared. What I’m describing is quite a difficult challenge because, on one hand, you want this to be like a philosophical syllogism, a logical proposition, to do with clear thinking, but at the same time you also don’t want this to become a cage that stops people getting in. I completely disagree with the Judd proposition that the highest aspiration of art is to have a specific object that is purely itself and refers to nothing. I want people to inhabit my sculpture with their own lives, feelings, thoughts, emotions, whatever. I would like the logical and affective to be in the right balance.

PT: You also question the issue of the placement of sculpture by realising what you call ‘SUSPENDED / GRAVITY works’, such as LOCK I (1994). These works develop a particular link with architecture, with walls and ceilings that become grounds for them… Do you want to strengthen the ties between sculpture and architecture, even if there had been, in the history of art, an autonomisation of sculpture against architecture?

AG: I want to make the living bodies of the viewers more conscious of their place in space. I also want to make the spaces, the rooms or the beaches, the mountains that I occupy more conscious. So I think that my work is more like the revenge rather than a rebirth of the caryatid. Take LOST HORIZON, for example [7]. I presented this work as an internalised response to the EVENT HORIZON installation over the rooftops of Central London. LOST HORIZON is made of thirty-two bodyforms: six on the ceiling, six on the floor, six on the two long walls, four on the two short ones. They completely undermined any sense of the room’s autonomy and your position in it. They undermined one’s assurance that gravity is constant, that the room has a defined position in space at large and put the whole thing into free fall. As a result, you feel nausea, you lose the senses of up/down, left/right, front/back. Part of my strategy is disorientation. In order for you to begin to feel again your spacetime relation, I have to disrupt the certainties of the architectural context.

PT: Wondering about what inhabiting a place means, Martin Heidegger asks himself: where a work of art is at home? He answers that a museum or a collection can be a home for a work of art, on condition that it is not reduced to an object. With you, there are many different placements or sites where we would least expect to find works of art. What does it mean to work in a museum or a gallery and in an old tram storage station in Vienna, along a coast in Germany, inside a water tower in Italy, in the Great Australian Desert, in a class room, at a swimming pool, etc?

AG: All art now has to be lost: to be an awkward interloper within life, that is its job. What Heidegger talks about in The Origin of the Work of Art, the idea that the temple is part of its landscape and the landscape part of the temple is an ideal, and we have lost it. This is a classical image of interdependence of site and object. And while I recognise this ideal, I think that sculpture does not have a home. For me, sculpture is a lost subject, an alien body that infects and interrupts the cohesion of place. The museum is just one place amongst many wherein you might find art – but not art at work but in refuge. I’m not against museums because I think they have a very important part to play in the memory of a culture. But before my work has any need to be in the museums it has to have a life, it has to have adventures in the real world. For me, art has to be part of everyday life and

every one of my pieces is an attempt to look at a new context and say: how can I deal with this opportunity? In EVENT HORIZON I was exposing the bodies that you might say are normally contained and protected within architecture exposed in elemental space in order to ask where does human being fit, undermining the normality of the urban context.

PT: In other words, you are very interested in getting your sculptures out of the protective context of the museum…

AG: Yes but I also want to destabilise the museum itself. The Hayward show, for example, was a laboratory of experimentation about how you use the social space of a museum in ways that are physically engaging. This was not about the validation of my work, neither was it about giving objects a precious and special position within aesthetical intellectual framework. It was much more about experimenting with how people might or might not be engaged in experience per se.

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1. Most of the sculptures of Antony Gormley are cast from the bodies of particular people - and the most frequently from his own body (see infra).

2. Luc Boltanski in Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Conversations, Manuella Éditions, 2008, pp. 62-63.

3. EVENT HORIZON was created for the first time during the Hayward exhibition ANTONY GORMLEY: BLIND LIGHT, 17 May – 19 August 2007, London. The work consisted in an installation of 31 sculptures, placed on rooftops and in pedestrian areas in an around the Southbank Centre and across a 1.5 km sq area of Central London on the north and south of the River Thames.

4. See Antony Gormley, SteidlMACK, Göttingen, 2007, p. 181.

5. BLIND LIGHT is an installation of Antony Gormley presented for the first time during the Hayward exhibition.

6. See Antony Gormley website, www.antonygormley.com

7. LOST HORIZON was presented during the exhibition of Antony Gormley at White Cube Mason's Yard, 6 March – 12 April 2008, London.