

ANTONY GORMLEY

ROD MENGHAM - BODY COUNT

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Yet though the choice of what is to be done
Remains with the alive, the rigid nation
Is supple still within the breathing one;
Its sentinels yet keep their sleepless station,
And every man in every generation,
Tossing in his dilemma on his bed,
Cries to the shadows of the noble dead.

W.H.Auden, 'Letter to Lord Byron'

The story of modern archaeology is the story of impermanence. For every object buried with care, there are many others trapped by chance, around which shapes form; so that momentary events give rise to structure, fleetingness is frozen, and the accidental takes on the guise of the general, becoming a cultural symptom. As soon as treasure-seeking is overtaken by a desire for knowledge, the single-minded pursuit of grave goods is exchanged for a general impressibility, the evenly distributed, impartial attention of the map-maker and surveyor. At which point, what is most cherishable in the archaeological record is what nearly escaped it: the ephemeral, the ignorable, even the negligible. We feel closer to the past when we see what no-one else saw, the acts of omission, displacement, or of failed recovery; and we feel closest of all when these acts have a bodily immediacy: in the mark of the maker's thumb on a still-drying tile, in a child's footprint on cement, in the body trying to catch its breath while it is buried in ash.

The early work of Antony Gormley, created during the decade after his graduation in Archaeology, Anthropology and History of Art from the University of Cambridge, is attuned to the paradox of the instantiated body. In sculptural installations such as MOTHER'S PRIDE (1982) and BED (1981), the body is absent as a solid object, and yet the work is wrapped around that absence. BED refers in its title to an article of furniture in daily use, and yet its impression of two body-shapes side by side suggests an artificial posture, a formal arrangement that recalls the composure of death, of two corpses that have been laid out. The bed-like shape becomes public, a plinth for display, rather than a place for intimacy and repose. The layers of sliced bread that comprise the sculpture echo the stratigraphy of an archaeological site, reminding us that the word 'bed' has a geological connotation, while the human-sized cavities resemble the outlines uncovered in the soil at archaeological excavations where human remains have decayed and disappeared. Gormley's sculpture makes humanity seem more fragile, its existence more evanescent, than a common foodstuff that is easily more biodegradable, and yet the spots of mould that begin to fleck the sculpture after a while are a reminder that different rates of decay are still reflections of the same organic process. The sculpture reverses expectations in several ways, being composed of bread that appears to eat humanity, rather than the other way round. As organic material, humanity never really disappears, but is simply converted into a different form, while as individual consciousness it seems to disappear in sleep and death. As collective consciousness, it survives in the encoding of rituals, customs and traditions, in a repertoire of activities that span the rites of passage of daily life and human longevity, from going to bed to going to our graves. Art intensifies that encoding, which Gormley highlights, magnifies and interrogates.

Another bread work, MOTHER'S PRIDE, continues the dialogue with archaeology as the study of human traces. The outline of a single prone body is recorded in a single layer of tesselated bread slices. On this occasion, the posture does not suggest deliberation, does not confirm our expectation of inherited and repeated gestures (what John Grierson, the pioneer of the British documentary film movement, referred to as 'actions worn smooth by time'), but seems to be the outcome of a chance event, capturing the experience of an isolated moment. Nevertheless, the body is hunched up, implying an awareness of fragility, of vulnerability through exposure; it seems to have obeyed an instinct for turning in on itself, in the search for warmth, protection, invisibility. The bare outline, the stencilling of the human form, recalls the iconography of a crime scene. The title refers not only to the brand name of one of Britain's major bread suppliers, but also to the familial status of the missing body, as somebody's son, the focus of all their hopes and cares. The forensic investigation that aims to reconstruct the sequence of events leading up to the crime employs many of the same techniques as archaeology, composing a narrative from circumstantial evidence. The mystery that is solved by detective work is structurally related to the puzzle that must be pieced together by the excavator. Gormley's interest in scientific procedures begins with their investment in story-telling, their emulation of artistic methods of interpreting the world.

The absent bodies of the early bread works are not exchanged for, or upgraded to, presences in the anthropomorphic forms of the early 1990s, since these are more often than not derived from body casts, which are solidified versions of absence. The main difference lies in the abandonment of the fictional body, which is paradoxically more individualised than its substitute, the replica of the authorial body, whose expressiveness is severely curtailed. The sarcophagus-like shape of INSTRUMENT II (1991), the hieratic pose of SOVEREIGN STATE (1989-1990), and the kouros-like rigidity of the works in the LEARNING TO SEE series (1993-1996) all invite comparison with the stylised restraint of ancient Egyptian and archaic Greek statues. Both cultures are nominated by Wilhelm Worringer in his ABSTRACTION AND EMPATHY for the retraction of subjective experience in their art, for their avoidance of individualising characteristics. They represent a tendency towards abstraction in those traditions of thought which reject the attraction towards empathy, towards a romanticising identification with the primacy of the individual. In ancient art, this is part of the subordination of the human to the divine, while in Gormley's art, the de-emphasising of the realm of the subjective is not driven primarily by an acknowledgement of the sacred, despite his interest in meditation, breathing techniques, and heightened states of consciousness. The disciplined formality that marks much of his figurative work is part of its orientation towards the anthropological dimension of human experience; paradoxically, his extensive use of casts of his own body does not concentrate attention on features that are unique but on those that are typical. Any suggestion of portraiture is eradicated in the process of making generic statements about shared conditions. The unrepeatable nature of individual experience is displaced by the proliferation of casts of the same body, and by replications of the same pose in serial works like LEARNING TO SEE. SOVEREIGN STATE and INSTRUMENT II represent a further stage in the movement from figurative to abstract, although they are rooted in some of the oldest traditions of funerary art. The equivalent of the sarcophagus lid that once provided a canvas for the painter to reveal the identity of the deceased is left bare or wiped clean in these works, which focus on the means of achieving a seminal or umbilical connection with the bodies of others. The forms of joining

that motivate and animate these works seem to conceive of cultural identity in both spatial and temporal terms, imagining a community in which the memory of traditions binds together the living and the dead, and in which sculpture provides a material basis and a generic template for the act of commemoration.

Although they stand alone, these single figures are grouped with others in the mind, as well as with the viewer, who brings to them a reciprocity of scale. This is one important effect of Gormley's structural allusions to the first known yardstick for monumental sculpture, the Egyptian cubit, which was derived from the proportions of the human body, referring specifically to the length of the forearm between the elbow and the tip of the middle finger. With the move away from the standard figure to the assembling of crowds of related figures in the FIELD works of the 1990s, Gormley cuts the link with the perception of the body as point of origin for the scale of significance we respond to most naturally. The various versions of FIELD all combine a contraction and expansion of scale: the individual components represent a dramatic miniaturisation of anthropomorphic elements, while the ramification of slight variants seems unmanageably extensive, and potentially endless. With the turn towards the figurine, Gormley is experimenting with the earliest known scale adopted for plastic art during the Palaeolithic, when carving and modelling related most closely to the range of activities of everyday life, to the practicalities of survival as well as to ritual observances, and was less specialised than it ever would be again. Taken individually, the small terracotta figures of the FIELD installations are clearly the products of artisanal practice, of the non-professional activities of a team of helpers whose lives are centred elsewhere. Their participation in these large-scale projects does not provide them with a medium for the expression of individual preoccupations, but binds them together, through a collaboration whose purpose is to assign an aesthetic value to their labour with its attention to material and design.

Their production of a crowd is what transforms them into a community, for however short a period. It offers a secular parallel to the mobilisation of labour in the erection of the great religious earthworks of the Bronze Age, when the creation of monuments like Silbury Hill, it is now supposed, did not have as its objective the use of a completed structure, but achieved its purpose in the consecration of labour to the process of building. All that remains of that experience and its duration has been homogenised in a single, massive barrow-shape, unlike Gormley's assemblages which preserve the granularity of individual contributions. For the spectator, whose gaze is returned in a thousand pairs of eyes, there is a sense of being on the wrong side of that collaboration, excluded from its conditions of belonging and transplanted to a different experience of duration. At the same time, it is possible to grasp the economy of effort involved by focusing on single figurines. But which ones? To encounter these installations for the first time is to be overpowered by a sense of infinite regression, by the feeling that the relationship between the details of the work can never be grasped. There is no way of taking the measure of art that observes the principle of cellular multiplication when each cell of meaning is peculiar and incommensurable. It is not unreasonable to react to Gormley's FIELD projects in terms of a constant oscillation of scales: an initial focus on detail gives way to a perception of volume, and the viewer is soon caught up in the alternation of choice between small and large, between individual and crowd; always missing, and therefore always trying to locate, the intermediate term of community.

Perhaps the most unnerving aspect of the viewer's experience is that sense of being on the receiving end of something very remote from modern sensibilities: the concentrated pathos of a supplication, a mute appeal for intercession, that is usually directed towards an object of faith. The choreography of these installations touches the neutrality of individual figurines with a contagious sense of shared expectations: they are congregants, worshippers, cultic adherents, inhabitants of a world in which labour is equivalent to prayer in a system of obligations like that of the gift economies described by Marcel Mauss. Their petitioning of the western art-lover takes place within the institutional space of a gallery whose conception of value is influenced by the stress-patterns of commerce and fashion, whether yielding or resistant to them. The confrontation is unsettling in its divination of the relations of power, and no less in the way its spatial arrangements articulate a resent-day geography of answerability.

In the more recent EVENT HORIZON, the field that is occupied by both viewer and sculptures is extended beyond the gallery into the surrounding urban environment. The relative equilibrium in the mutual regard of viewer and work (it is the visitor to the gallery who chooses when to break off) is exchanged for the protean uncertainties of immersion in the city, with its patterns and rhythms of circulation. Sustained contemplation within the gallery increases the viewer's confidence in being able to take the measure of the work, while the unpredictable disclosures of separate elements in EVENT HORIZON - the viewer is repeatedly taken by surprise over the timing of these 'events' - has the reverse effect: the living relationship with the sculpture seems to consolidate its advantage over spectators, and not vice versa. Recourse to eidetic memory in order to build up a picture of the total installation can foster the suspicion that the key to the work lies beyond perceptual reach. The viewer's first awareness of each element is haunted by the way it approaches a model of pre-emptive surveillance, although the gathering host of onlookers has much in common with the company of angels in Wim Wenders's film WINGS OF DESIRE, transforming the conditions of oppressive surveillance into those of benign watchfulness: a utopian alternative to the everyday lines of force around which the city is organised when the sculpture is not there.

With the ALLOTMENT installations of the mid-1990s, Gormley adhered to the scale of his life-casts, but introduced greater variation of size while simultaneously enhancing the tendency towards abstraction - or at least towards a geometrical reduction of the proportional relations of the body. The resulting box-like shapes are swivelled in different directions, their straight-sided alignments emphasising the passivity and regimentation only hinted at in the orientation of the FIELD ensembles. There was something more organic about the dispositions of the terracotta figures, inclined towards the viewer as towards a source of light and heat, lumps of clay awaiting a breath of life, although there was a greater self-possessiveness about their rectangular successors. The title ALLOTMENT refers to the leasing of a small plot of ground within a patchwork of small-holdings, an area restricted to private use within a public scheme. The tension between private and public recaptures the mutual off-setting of individual and collective in the earlier work, and gives it a deliberately commonplace bearing, a context of mundanity. At the same time, the most obvious visual, as opposed to semantic, correlate for these works is supplied by the even greater density of individual plots in a graveyard. The verticality of the separate elements, the rigidity of the concrete with which they are constructed, and the simulation of family groupings, recalls an arrangement of headstones. And yet each component is more coffin-shaped than tablet-shaped, suggesting the imagined state of graveyards at the Last Judgement, with the dead standing rather than lying in their allotted places.

Within the context of Gormley's work as a whole, these modernist sarcophagi recall most strongly the singular ROOM FOR THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN DESERT (1989), which anticipates the two-tier structure used throughout the different versions of ALLOTMENT, although it is based, unlike the standing forms of the larger work, on the crouching body of the artist. The Australian room seems only just large enough to contain humanity, qualifying the status of habitation in relation to domestic space, and more generally to the idea of settlement. In its true condition, humanity does not inhabit rooms, but an uncircumscribed environment, in which Western conceptions of property are irrelevant. Australian aboriginals do not think of their relationship to the land in terms of ownership, but in terms of guardianship. The individual body as habitation has no more value than any other container for a cultural legacy that is continually renewed in art and in song and that incorporates the living within the community of the dead. The containers of ALLOTMENT have alternative functions, like the replicated structures of Neolithic societies in which the houses of the living are identical in form to houses built for the dead.

In a certain sense, the exploration of these concerns in ALLOTMENT runs parallel to Heidegger's understanding of 'dwelling' as the most significant way in which humanity partakes of Being (a category of being larger than that of human existence). 'Dwelling' is the most fundamental way in which humanity takes the measure of its relationship to Being, and the most fundamental mode of 'dwelling' is in art. Heidegger specifies poetry as the 'measure-taking of all measure-taking' in his essay 'Poetically, Man Dwells', but the rigour and consistency with which Gormley's work has questioned the scope of measure-taking, habitation, and anthropocentric thought, while animating the relationship between them, proposes no less of a role for sculpture.

Perhaps the most compelling way in which these questions have been framed is in the different versions of the installation ANOTHER PLACE (1997). It is difficult to grasp the extent of these installations at any given time, since their visibility is subject to the diurnal rhythms of the tides. Temporal measures, of a kind over which humanity has no control, are of equal importance with the spatial intervals that dictate the viewer's sense of relation both to the lifesize figures planted on the shore and to the vanishing point on the horizon that they are all turned towards. On a clear day, this makes the projected measure of the installation identical to the threshold of the traditional Sublime, where the capacities of the intellect and the senses reach a limit that only the imagination can cross. That threshold marks the limit of the anthropocentric world, whose representatives are not drowned by the sea but are made to collaborate with it, their immersion corresponding to the absorption of humanity within a larger category of being, whose temporal and spatial measures they periodically converge with and diverge from. The morphogenetic parallels offered by the diverse locations in which ANOTHER PLACE is situated (the title itself proposes other levels of displacement, tries to look beyond the horizon) evokes an awareness of shared or reciprocal conditions that cannot be apprehended directly. Gormley's work has expanded outwards, from the hollow vacated by the body, to the geographies and histories in which it is implicated, emptying out the meanings of individual experience and excavating layers that reveal the evidence of what E. P. Thompson used to call 'customs in common'. His archaeologies of perception have changed the sculptural landscape.
