

ANTONY GORMLEY

INTERVIEW WITH MARJETICA POTRC

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Marjetica Potrc: When I first saw the FIELD in Salvatore Ala's gallery in New York, I was amazed by seeing thousands of small clay figures staring at me. I felt uneasy as if the subject of FIELD was myself and not the work. The "to be" of the work has become the "to be" of the viewer. Thinking about it afterwards, I started to question myself as to why. It was not possible to approach the work with formal language and with categories defining the objecthood of figure. The basic condition of the work seemed to be different.

Antony Gormley: I think it's an attempt to escape from the object nature of art into an idea of art as a creative place: as an open space. An open space that in this work can't be physically inhabited but nevertheless is an architecturally defined space in the gallery. Up to now the appreciation of art has been based on a kind of shared notion of space; that the viewer and the object share the same space and they have this dialogue where the audience perceives it - walks around it. With FIELD, the work entirely occupies the gallery. In an ideal installation, the space of the viewer and the space of the work are in some kind of balance and the first time shown in New York (the exhibition that you allude to) there was completely empty space as you came into the gallery, of about 800 sq ft. The entire gallery was lit to the same intensity. That 800 sq ft space was connected with main gallery down a corridor about 60 ft long and at the far end of the corridor you could see this orange glow and that was the work.

That was FIELD. There was a tension there. The body of the work was all facing you and you felt this pressure or invasion coming at you down the passage. When you got to the threshold of the work you had to stop - the border is very vulnerable. I think you feel that when you get to the end - to the point of view of the work and your feet are right next to these hand size pieces. The invitation or the awareness that they can be kicked is very strong. While some people get annoyed and they perhaps want to kick but don't, other people lie down on the floor with their chin on their hands and gaze out across the Field, engaging with its intimacy.

The occupation of space is something I have been interested in for a long time. The lead works try to negotiate a relationship between the body as a thing and the body as a place, so there has been an attempt to make an image of something and also to contain space: a space that can't be occupied physically but can be occupied imaginatively and sometimes that space is perceivable because there's a hole either in the mouth or the eyes or the genitals but with FIELD, for the first time, the placeness has overcome the objectness: the object is dissolved not by being hollow as in the lead works but by being multiple and the place is open; it looks on one hand like an empty landscape but then that landscape itself has been personalized: touched; made; constructed out of these beings that look at you. There is a sense in which this space is on one hand empty and on the other hand is full. On one hand it is unconscious and on the other hand it is highly conscious. It looks back at us across the threshold; you stop at it and you look across this touched landscape and it is a transposition from an external landscape into an internal space. That's the physical side of it, the spiritual or imaginative side of it is that because it possesses the attributes of consciousness, these gazes that look back at us - we become curiously the place of the work. There is a trick that the work plays - life becomes its subject - we previously would have entered a gallery expecting to share the space of the gallery with works and, in some way, aesthetically be possessed or possess those works. With FIELD, the space is entirely occupied by the work and the work then seems to make us its subject; seems to make life its subject so we are, in a way, invaded and it's not only that this space, the art gallery space, that we thought was ours has been invaded but we are also invaded; we are made the object of the art's scrutiny. These gazes look to us to find their place; they have a place but it's a place that we can't enter and they are looking to the space of consciousness inside us as their rightful promised land and that's a strange feeling. I hope that this work makes the viewer's experience its subject: the experience of looking. There is also a way in which the work appropriates memory. This invasion of physical space which you could also think of as a kind of infection is a physical metaphor for personal space. It's a kind of physical equivalent for consciousness. The FIELD becomes a field of conscience. It negotiates two factors: the spirit of the ancestors, the primal population made of the earth, where mud takes on the attributes of sentience and the evocation of the inborn - those who are yet to come.

We've become terribly blind in a way. There is so much of contemporary art made in the West that in a sense has as its validation only the last twenty years of Western practice in which the reference to conceptual or minimal concerns become its right to be given the name of art at all. I've just made two works called LOST SUBJECT. I think we've been obsessed with the idea of the object because we've been obsessed since minimalism - since the Fried/Greenberg debate - with the idea of referentiality or non-referentiality. The post-modern take on referentiality is almost as absurd in my mind as the minimalist idea that somehow you could make something that was solely self-referential. I think it's quite impossible. We have to move on from American-led art and objecthood towards subjectivity and a non-dominant worldview. Western art history is one art history: there are many histories, there are many arts, there are many reasons why things get made and while I acknowledge the fact that I am a Western artist working in a Western tradition, I think that the most important condition of today is this sense that we have the globalization of culture. What that means is that all those dialectics between self and other; between the developed and the undeveloped; between the first and the third world have been rejected as modes of thought. So if there's one thing that FIELD suggests it's the globalization of culture, the necessary primitivisation of culture - not meaning 'the primitive' as understood formally in shows like the one at the Museum of Modern Art, New York - but primitive as in fundamental. I hope that what FIELD does is radically re-present the question of where culture belongs or what the place of culture is and what its parameters are - does culture come out of language or does culture come out of being? In a sense this is 'the flood' the second time around. This is the second moment of creation in which we have to start with the idea of the existence of man, not with the old story of Adam and Eve and a gradual dispersion - but with the idea that there are no longer different streams of dispersion and division within the evolution of humankind. There are no streams any more, that is why 'mainstream' in talking about art is useless - there are no streams; there's just an ocean; one ocean; one humanity. We have to look for the notion of future in us and that's why we are the subject; we are the 'to be' of the work. In the terms that I am thinking of, category and formal language are really not much use. I'm trying to return people to life with the sense not of having learned about things that lie outside of themselves and the history of those things, but in some way to recover their own memories; their own aspirations and be returned to life with a greater intensity as creators.

MP: Exactly. Your work is not a commentary on the past. It is looking forward. You include other people in the process of working. Their product, the FIELD, looks like a topography of the world. Not the world as a whole: there is the AMERICAN FIELD, the EUROPEAN FIELD. The work is not about the expansion of an idea, it is about acknowledging the questioning. Do you think we can talk at all about a shared consciousness of mankind?

AG: I am trying to find where creativity fits in the world, people are part of the material and the subject. You might say that this is a totalitarian kind of

project but I don't want to manipulate people; I don't want to force them to do things, but I do want to engage their inner selves. I get people involved in these projects because I think there's value in it, in the working for its own sake. I also get people involved because for me part of the work has to do with realising the potential for art to be everywhere: positive creativity. The work is about questions. It's about somehow managing to make the reality of today, which is a reality of self in the world in a way that it's never been before because the world is present in a way that it's never been before because the world is present to us, mediated, maybe, but present to us all of the time. The globalisation of culture has happened. When Duchamp created his malic moulds with the postman, the bellhop and the soldier etc., it was as if those bachelors that were applying for a fulfilment in the illuminating gas of the Bride, suggest that the carapace of self is very much dictated by function. I don't think we believe in function any more in the same way. I think Duchamp was an heir to the Nineteenth Century in that way: an heir to notions of social cohesion that are no longer valid today. We know that we can be a postman one day and a pool attendant the next. Postmen are probably less and less permanent positions. 'Postman Pat' is a fictional desire for the permanent postman. I'm afraid those assurances are sentimental in a time in which everything is up for question: a time when notions of identity and self can no longer be formulated around the family, around the tribe, around the nation, even around the job because all of those things that maybe a hundred years ago did seem established and permanent in relation to the culture are qualified. And then we have a curiously naked moment when selfhood and the world are mirrors of each other.

MP: Your work acknowledges that the understanding of the self has changed the world. The notion of the centred self in life. The desire for permanency, the finite object in art, all those notions were structured around Western metaphysics.

AG: But we can talk about the shared consciousness of mankind. I love Teilhard de Chardin's idea of the 'Noosphere'; the idea that there is a deep connection between the mineral and the mental. This has everything to do with sculpture. But in some way the history of material transformation on the planet is a progress from slower, less complex forms to faster, more complex forms and that, in some way, human consciousness is a kind of atmosphere. He calls it 'Noosphere' - the idea of an encirclement of the entire surface of the globe by 'mind'. I think that mind is collective; a collective subjective and one of the tasks is to make that collectivity more apparent.

MP: Is there a criticism or fear in your work about the state of civilisation?

AG: Yes. There's a question of trying to reformulate what it means to be civilised. 'Civilised' suggests urban culture; this is an invasion of urban culture by something to do with the remote, the marginal, the dispossessed, the unacknowledged, the fear lurking in the subconscious, the degree to which we try to live with the unknown but in a time of greater meditation - we expect everything to be explained - this work refuses to be explained. It just goes on quietly asking, looking, waiting? It suggests that there has to be a new negotiation with the earth. The idea of civilisation as being an opposition between those that are civilised and those that are savage can no longer continue because we can no longer continue to exploit in a global world because we discover that we are exploiting ourselves.

I think that there is a profound suggestion in this work that our own turning away from the dark side of our psyche has a lot to do with this relationship that we have physically with the third world or with what we consider to be the less developed world. In a time of global unity it is just not possible to have that kind of division any more and this is the unconscious and the third world brought right into our living room to occupy space and it feels uncomfortable and causes anxiety. The ideology that has pushed Western Civilisation on has run out of steam. We're in a time of total lack of confidence about language; about our ability to communicate. The price that we paid for the tools that we had to invent for civilisation and for survival has been too heavy. It's very simple. I think people who live close to the earth, on the whole, take on the systems of nature. Natural systems are self-regulating and ours are not. Ours depend on imbalance; depend on division; depend on exploitation. The question the piece is asking or the fear the piece expresses is if we continue with ideas that have fuelled Western civilisation of expansionism and ever, ever increasing markets of greater extraction, there will be a point when the earth can no longer support us. So this beautiful story of evolution of consciousness from inert mineral matter will be ended, and consciousness and the human life that supports it will be seen as a toxic invasion. I am very aware that the biosphere, the living edge or skin of the world is something like one billionth part of the total mass. It's the skin of living matter that is immensely fragile and we have to decide whether or not we are going to take up the challenge of being part of it or whether we are going to be the agents of its destruction.

MP: In works like SENSE or TESTING A WORLD VIEW you question the relationship of the body to the surrounding space. To me, those works further suggest questioning the space of Euclidean geometry, which, as you know, belongs to a particular world view. In the last ten years there were many new museums built in Europe and in the USA. Most of them represented the concept of 'white cube' architecture embodying the ideal space of Modernism. How do you feel exhibiting in such a space, when Field is clearly not about a formal ideal or ideology?

AG: I think that both of these questions have already been answered. Part of the potency of the work comes from the infection of the 'white cube' by earth: by this invasion, or migration, of a body that we would prefer to forget and I think in fact the whiter the cube the better the power of this invasion is felt. It's not only the architecture but also the cultural context that really provides the condition of seeing so that when FIELD was first seen in New York, having been made in Mexico, there was a very clear feeling of an invasion of a northern cultural space by something very foreign to it from the south. But when the piece was shown in Mexico City, in the place of its birth, it was a celebration and touched on Mexico's attitudes to death that are very central to their culture. In Mexico it was not a threat. In works like SENSE, the concrete pieces, there is an acceptance of condition. On one level, life is immersed in the body as the body is immersed in architecture and so the idea of the condition of the body being transferred into the condition of architectural space and idea of those concrete block works as being concentrations of architectural space in which the body is seen not as object but as space is simply a transfer from one agent to another, from a smaller to a greater condition. What intrigues me most about them is that they take the language that could be seen as being very negative and transfer it into something celebratory. The notion of embodiment in those works is from flesh to space but that space carries feeling: the feeling that the body carried. In a work like SENSE, the title is indicative of what I'm trying to express which is sensation in its widest meaning: an opening of the senses. An awareness of being and an awareness of being in space. I think the spatial sense in some ways has been cauterised within our imaginations: our consciences. Space is not about measurement or geometry: those are the coordinates by which space has been occupied, possessed and made conscious in a Western way. What SENSE expresses is the way in which the imaginative space inside the body, the darkness of the body, connects with the outer space - deeper space - infinite space. The sense, which is accessible through meditation of infinite extension, in which consciousness can be transferred or can flow from inside the body to outside the body. In some way negotiating and destroying the conditionality of the body is what the work is about. TESTING A WORLD VIEW is a very different kind of thing. Here we've got five body forms that are solid equivalents of the space within the blocks but they are generalised. The body there has taken on the kind of right angle that is used in geometry. The body is in crisis. That right angle which I think of as being not just geometry but also moral rightness results in an internal crisis. The idea of these body forms being flung around the room testing themselves against the architecture in a painful way is much more critical of conditions and is a very millenarian work. It talks about the crisis of the Western world view - the crisis of the conceptual frame that we have put around space.

MP: This conceptual frame produced also the network of communication which helped the globalisation of culture happen. And it changed our bodies. Our own bodies became static and the time compressed. On the other hand, I was fascinated by Oliver Stone's TV serial 'Wide Palms' where people stepped out of the TV screen. It was like renaissance utopia coming alive, illusion became a body. Have you ever envisioned the FIELD in a town square, with streets replacing the gallery doors?

AG: After you suggested that I made a little drawing and the fact is that FIELD is an internal work, internal in architecture and internal in imagination. If we did it outside, I feel it would be like a re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace or Tiananmen Square or Stalingrad or any other moments of political history in which those shared civic spaces become the arenas of history and this is a very different attitude to history. The notion here is not of a revolution that happens on personal, intimate, interior space where the white walls of the gallery simply become a condition of our mental set.

MP: What form of existence would the FIELD take in open nature? What happens if there is no frame of civilisation for the work? Your lead figures used to be 'framed' by geometry.

AG: FIELD in a field is a kind of tautology but it would work. I mean it is a field and it does have that agricultural allusion but I think the frame of civilisation is the thing the work is testing and without it, it simply becomes an extension of the natural system, it becomes less political.

MP: In a way, it's like a living organism, like water, it settles in place, it doesn't organise it. I noticed that you have a body of work that deals exclusively with the human senses (INSTRUMENT and EXPOSURE, PEER etc.) The notion of five senses has existed since the beginning of time. It was put aside in Modernism by the predominance of geometry and sight. Could you perhaps explain in a broader way how you approach the senses?

AG: I've tried to say something about that in relation to SENSE. I think you could identify my project as a whole as a return to the body not as object but as place and not only as place but as instrument; as a workshop for the spirit. The idea of the senses as being gateways of the soul, of being the portals through which perception goes in and out of the body, is very dear to me because it suggests a kind of osmotic, breathing relationship with the phenomena of light and of space of which we are a part. It suggests immersion; immersion within rather than vision that suggests simply distance. Vision requires distance. Sight has been acknowledged in FIELD. All the other pieces are either blind or if the eyes (like in LEARNING TO SEE) are acknowledged, they are turned inward. What's wonderful about the sense of sound or the sense of hearing or the sense of smell is that we are within it and it is within us. It's not about distance, it is about immersion. I am interested in the senses because they are the channels through which we are immersed in being rather than distanced in knowledge.

MP: The Venus of Willendorf was made in the palm of the hand, inside the touch. The figure has no eyes. Don't you think that the energy the viewer confronts while standing in front of the FIELD comes from the gaze and from the energy of the touch which is embedded in the figures?

AG: There's touch in this work which is then made conscious by being given eyes. But paradoxically in FIELD, I think the eyes are simply a way of humanising the distance. There is a sense in which this is a landscape of eyes: of gazes but the gazes are there to transmit feeling not to identify; to categorise; to give a name. These eyes are there to make connection. I think Stephen Bann's idea ('The Raising of Lazarus', Malmo-Tate-IMMA catalogue 1993) of this work as a last judgement is very correct. The question is who is being judged.

MP: Do you think it is more appropriate to call yourself an artist rather than a sculptor?

AG: No, I think I'm a sculptor. I think I deal with matter. I think I deal with first-hand experience. I think I deal with stuff. I got fed up dealing with illusion. I got fed up making two-dimensional equivalents of a three-dimensional world or three-dimensional equivalents of a four-dimensional world. I want to use time like matter and I'm a sculptor.
