

ANTONY GORMLEY

INTERVIEW WITH HANS ULRICH OBRIST

From ANTONY GORMLEY, MARCO, Mexico, 2008

Hans Ulrich Obrist: To begin with what you're working on at the studio right now. Can we talk about your new project for Venice?

Antony Gormley: We have three ideas for the Biennale: a rain room; a lightning room; and a field horizon room. Which do you think we should develop first? The rain room is basically a rectangle within a room that is 40 meters long and 20 meters wide, made entirely out of falling water, through which there are diagonal pathways, avenues and cross-streets. If you can imagine a skewed Allotment, but instead of rectangular concrete forms, these are made from water and light.

HUO: And is it possible to do all three?

AG: Probably. But maybe not at the same time. I think the lightning would be the most spectacular, and the rain room is the most easily achieved.

HUO: And obviously the field would defy gravity?

AG: Yes, I also like that idea of a field of balls floating at eye level, spaced far enough apart that you can move between them as they bob gently on currents of air, like a floating carpet. It is like an Einstein space-time relativity map, but it's actually happening.

HUO: So it could be a unique experience, a little bit like at the Hayward show where it's an experience of immersion, no?

AG: Immersion is the most important issue for art at the moment. We've gone from a concern with objects to a concern with fields, and from fields to the idea of immersion, which links back to Walter Pater's idea of art aspiring to the condition of music, creating a completely seamless relationship between proprioception and context. That's what I hoped Blind Light was: it took you away from the symbolic order of the world, the issue of the hermeneutics, the constant interpreting of external phenomena, and into a state of immersion in being. You could say, "well that's a bit of a big project, you know, this is philosophical!" but for me this is the real potential of art now: how do you make spaces that allow people to be in ways that maybe have always been there, but have never been seen, or have been waiting to be felt?

HUO: But it's fascinating as it brings us right into the middle of things. The idea of immersion is something which plays a big role in architecture. For example with Diller & Scofidio's Blur Pavilion (2002).

AG: Absolutely. I talked with Elizabeth Diller about the Pavilion, and the idea of an architecture that does not define space and protect from the elements, but extends natural phenomena. It exemplifies the distinction between the experience of objects and the experience of experience itself. For me, this is central to the discussion of the evolution of the purpose of art. We could say that for most of European art's progress, it's been about picturing. Then in Modernism it turns to interpretation and deconstruction. And now, I think, we're into a completely new phase in which art is about providing a place where the human subject is somehow able to concentrate on his/her own being. This is something that Olafur Eliasson is dealing with, and so am I. The subjective experience of space-time, the condition of life, rather than being in some way the assumed background condition for refined perceptions of the object, now becomes a landscape in itself. And I think this is a new paradigm in the evolution of art.

HUO: I think it's a very fascinating point and I couldn't agree more. Some years ago, at a dinner in Rotterdam, I sat next to Diller and Scofidio? That was actually the year before they had done the cloud in Yverdon, and they were saying that there is a sort of shift in space and it's no longer the idea of a building as an object, but it's this idea of immersion, and that that would somehow be the way that they would define architecture at that moment. So often in architecture and in art we have similar things cropping up, and there seems to be a kind of morphogenetic field about this move away from the object and towards immersion. So maybe let's talk a little bit more about this idea also of finding ways beyond objects, about the status of the object, the quasi-object - the non-object - in relation to this immersion.

AG: What happens with the object is that it becomes porous. It then refuses its representational or symbolic status and becomes something like a resonator or an instrument. So, if we transfer this idea to Event Horizon - the work with 31 body forms that are dispersed across London - we are dealing with cloned objects where you, as the perceiver, become implicated in a field. This is no longer the appreciation of the relationship of parts and whole within a singular body (as one might look at a sculpture of Rodin or Phidias). Rather, it's a singular body that has been repeated many times, and has become an infection of a given environment. The key about this for me is that it reverses the figure-ground relationship that has been so fundamental to the development of Western art. Think of mythical figures within an idealized landscape that give focus in the work of Poussin or Claude, for example. In Event Horizon these possible places become a hole in the urban situation which becomes the figure, and the ground is these empty, dark silhouettes seen against the sky; human-shaped holes in reality. It is part of the shift in status of the art object, from being a unique object of evolved perception (the cultured eye) to being something much more about the being of the viewer. In Event Horizon, the body forms all faced the viewer, who was at the epicenter of a perceptual field, so this shift was even clearer. The experience of art has evolved irrevocably away from an object's authority, to the notion of the authorial experience of the perceiver.

HUO: And immersion is...

AG: ?About how you engage with space. The old Newtonian model was the object placed in space, defined by a containing boundary? Maybe there are ways of energizing space at large without a boundary: this is more quantum, and less Newtonian. We're having two parallel shifts: the transition in science between the study of discrete things, smaller and smaller, to field activities, to an engagement with emergence, the relationship between, for example, chaos theory and flow structures.

HUO: That whole discussion of immersion is something which in the Hayward show was so central because, on the one hand, your sculptures are, in an immersive way, placed into the city, but at the same time, with Blind Light, there was this idea of the viewer literally entering - immersing - into the

space between visibility and invisibility.

AG: I wanted find a way to factually, materially elucidate this relationship. The field phenomenon has an uncertainty of where things begin and end, and is about being inside a reflexive field that has no edge.

HUO: I thought that one of the things we could talk about is the notion of participation in relation to that. "Participation" has been so associated with the sixties, and when I discussed it with the late urbanist Giancarlo De Carlo of Team 10, which was instrumental at the time for participatory urbanism, he told me that in the seventies, eighties and nineties, the idea of a participatory art or architecture - telling people or viewers what to do - had come to be seen as very patronizing. So he said that there was a paradigm shift from explicit participation to implicit participation. And I think the thing about this immersion is that it's a very implicit kind of participation. I wanted to see if you would agree with that, and in general how you would see the notion of the spectator and whether he or she - as Marcel Duchamp said - does fifty percent of the work? Would that be true for you as well?

AG: I think that the main distinction is that with the happenings and actions of the sixties and seventies, there was a sense of theatre: doing something extraordinary that provided a spectacle in the mode of transgressive street theatre, whereas for me the notion of participation is much more internalized. There is still the economy of the viewer becoming the viewed, but it's more subliminal, and more focused on the inner life of the spectator and linking that to a wider field: it is as if the picturesque could be inverted, subjectivized and internalized. It's not about doing something zany and extraordinary in the flow of daily life. You're still moving through the determined conditions of an urban environment, but with the catalyst, indicators or measures of an artwork that could be incredibly subtle. You have an instrument to become aware of your being through a different frame. That implicit participation is away from theatre and more to do with a kind of bare attention. Think of Walter de Maria's Lightning Field or Richard Serra's Wall Projects, like the one in Flevoland (Holland).

HUO: What an interesting definition: from a loud participation to maybe a more quiet participation. Returning to the relationship between art and science, Marcel Duchamp's whole thinking was deeply inspired by that of Poincaré, and I've always believed that this sort of transfer, or this contact zone, between science and art can be unbelievably productive. So I was wondering whether the link to science in your work was indicated by any kind of scientific discovery, things that have particularly fascinated you or even perhaps dialogues with scientists?

AG: Yes, Basil Hiley and I have talked about David Bohm, and the idea of the Implicate Order. I'm interested in the Rosen-Podolsky wave/particle dichotomy, the turning point in the evolution of physics, and I keep going back to the implications of it. You could say there's the biological implication, which is the study of what Rupert Sheldrake calls morphic resonance, the behavior of shoals, herds and flocks. The way in which biological organisms self-organize into greater structures that cannot be held within the consciousness of any single member, but are nevertheless the product of collective activity and produce a collective body, and other behaviors that can be transmitted across communities without physical contact. I'm also interested in all of the research and language around quantum mechanics?. Think of what is about to happen in 50 days when they turn on the Large Hadron Collider in Geneva...

HUO: It's a countdown!

AG: Yes, it's a really vital moment in terms of the collapsing of history, because we will be returned to the first milliseconds of the beginning of space-time. And we will discover whether or not the Higgs boson is there. The idea that 94% of the specific gravity of our universe is unaccounted for and so far we've called it dark matter, and we're waiting to see if it is there... This is an incredibly exciting moment. We're sitting here surrounded by these drawings that are in a way also about limits and acceleration.

HUO: We're literally in the field...

AG: Yes. And you could say they're just traces of activity where I'm using my mind-body as a sensor. They're almost like cardiograms of different vectors, some of which may have associations with natural phenomena like rain, or over there a kind of geezer which is the tracing of paths using two hands...

HUO: How are you doing them, because it's almost as if they're related to physical action?

AG: I think of them as a kind of choreography for the hand-arm-brain. I mean obviously they come out of Pollock: these are not pictures of anything, they are their own ontology, they are the place where something is born, their own myth of origin, the registration of a moment of lived time, the same way that the sculptures are. They acknowledge the fact that they're simply traces. So they're like a line drawn in the sand, and that's how they're made. They are a wet ground with nothing added, simply scratches made into the weave of the paper with two steel needles which soak up the pigment. They're very quick and I make a lot and throw a lot away. I like to begin every day with this tuning activity.

HUO: And when did you start to do those?

AG: About two and a half years ago. The first ones were like this [shows drawing], just closed circuits, and then it got more complicated and got to be more like this [shows drawing] or this [shows drawing] and then...

HUO: Like galactic spheres, really.

AG: These are all done with one hand. And then I started moving towards these double-handed ones. The idea of these is to put the viewer in relation to a field, with the work becoming simply a place that allows the viewer a space of reflexivity.

HUO: This ties in with a lot of what you've said about your beginnings. You once said that the Viennese Actionists Brus, Muehl, Nitsch and Schwarzkogler have been really important for you, and that whole link to Actionism is there, although a very different form of Actionism.

AG: The Actionists were also trying to explode the "art object." All of my work is performative in that it starts with an event, but it's not about the public sharing of the event, it's always about the trace, an indexical register of a relatively small, intimate event. That's as true for the drawings as it is for the sculpture. And I guess with the most risky of the bigger works, whether it's Clearing, the five kilometers of continuous wire, or Blind Light, or Breathing Room, there's a sense in which we're no longer dealing with the forming of objects, we're trying to form experience. I have to say that I get worried when people ring up and say 'Blind Light isn't working.' I haven't been in this position before. Normally you make an object and it just stays there and

it does its thing. Now I'm responsible for machines. Blind Light is radical for me in the sense that this is a machine for experience.

HUO: I'd like to go back to this idea of porous objects...

AG: The suspended matrices and expansions are a good example of this. Here we are getting away from the making of a massive or hollow volume to making this place of being, an energy field. I had a group of German and Scandinavian visitors at the studio yesterday and I was trying to explain how something like Exergy was an objective correlative of the experience of being in Blind Light. It's very uncertain in this frozen explosion whether the zone of the body is a product of the field, or whether the field is a product of the body, and it demands participation.

It's a different form of participation from that of Blind Light. Nevertheless, in order to get anything from one of these matrix works, one has to walk around it, to summon the emergent form from the piece. The participation is finding a place for oneself in this field, a projection of one's being as a viewer into this zone of energy that is materialized in this object. I see the matrix works as being instrumental, but in a different way to the field phenomenon of Event Horizon: this is the place of a singular body which has become porous and extended into space at large, and uncertain as to whether it is a nest or a trap, soft or hard.

HUO: We've talked about science and the particle accelerator... Freeman Dyson said that the third millennium will be a biological age. And we also have Craig Venter and the whole gene discussion, which has dominated the scientific field over the last couple of years. I thought it would be interesting to see if there were any links you had with biology.

AG: Well, bio-cybernetics: we can now be creative interventionists in the construction of transgenic life forms. Morphological transmission is part of my work. In the works that I've just been describing - these expansions and matrices - there is an underlying question of where life begins, and our place in the evolution of life from the cellular to the embodied, and the collective, and what depends on what.

I was very interested in biology when I was a child; I loved the difference between monocotyledonous and dicotyledonous plant forms, the distinction between tubers and rhizomes, all of the structures of biology, particularly the process of parthenogenesis and morphological change at cellular level, and I've referred to them in works. If you think of the Domain series, this is a body form with the flesh missing, where the body is an aerial: a receiver or transmitter, taking the branching nerve system as the essential structure of the sensate body. Biology is a very rich resource, but philosophically it's not as exciting for me as the big questions to do with the reconciliation of quantum physics with gravity.

HUO: And now in summer 2008, we're here in the studio and you're preparing for your next major show after the Hayward, which is going to open at MARCO Monterrey in Mexico, where many of these drawings will be exhibited. Will this idea of the immersive field play a role in this exhibition as well?

AG: Yes, I'm making a work that I wanted to do years ago, which is going to be a room completely wallpapered with bread.

HUO: So it ties in with your early Bread pieces?

AG: Yes, you see that early work in glass? I made that in 1977, and it's just like a BI (a Chinese jade disk), but it's made of bread, and some of it's gone moldy, but it's been fitted together as a sort of puzzle. I was very keen to make a work that is simply a room where all the walls are covered in bread: making a surrounding out of what is normally ingested, a context out of what is normally turned internally into energy. So that's one immersive piece. Then we have Breathing Room: a consistent cubic volume of space, identified as a space frame, which is stretched in different axes into seven different frames that nest, and you can walk through it.

HUO: It's very architectural...

AG: Yes, if life was logical, this would have come before Clearing, because it's an attempt to make provisional the Cartesian one-point perspective and to use perspective to destroy perspective so it's...

HUO: It's multiple perspectives.

AG: Yes, exactly.

HUO: Or, as the great Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser called it, a perspective space.

AG: Maybe it's a compromised perspective, or a provisional perspective. Breathing Room is literally a frame, so the figure is the one that you, the viewer, bring in with you. But you can also watch other viewers. This was before Blind Light, and had this same way of allowing the viewers to become the viewed; it is an open work. But we also removed all of the electricity from the gallery, and as the day progressed the work absorbed light and then in the dark began to emit it, so that it became literally both an image and a physical structure, so it's also got that relation between virtual and real.

In relation to the architecture question, I started a series of body forms made out of blocks in 2003, four of which will be part of the Mexico show [Distillate II, Sublimate III, Grip II and Catch IV], as an attempt to apply the logic of the post and lintel structures of building to the body. More and more of us now live in cities, and the spatial condition of architecture is our spatial condition. I want to explore that and see what that means for our imagination.

HUO: In the Ralph Rugoff and Jacky Klein interview for the Hayward, you talk about that urban and architectural theme as something which really marked your work from the beginning. It's often the case that the first works of an artist have a kind of quality of incubation: a lot of the themes are already there, and we see it in your own works from 1979 or 1980. But also among your contemporaries there was a new urban sensibility which was seeking to position itself in opposition to the 'pastoralism' of Long...

AG: Yes, the great tragedy of English Modernism was that it turned into a kind of pastoral retreat, so what happened in St. Ives was a disaster. So much of art became social commentary or an illustration of an idea, rather than being the idea. This has been the problem about English art generally. You set your sails to half a wind, half understood, from somewhere else, and you sail to somewhere rural where it just blows itself out. Yes, I think we

have to stick with this urban condition because this is the condition; this is the crucible in which the contemporary imagination has to produce its fruits. There are only two subjects which interest me: body and space, or experience and extension. The human condition can only be addressed through issues of architecture and the body. So I am now making projects for inhabitable sculptures, and one of them is for a 40 storey building, in human form... [showing images].

HUO: Where will this be?

AG: I don't know. It's one of these 'utopia projects' which will probably never be realized...

HUO: But that's actually my favorite question, and also the only recurring one in my interviews, the utopia question; the unrealized project. It is a common one in relation to architecture, and very often architects will talk about their utopias, their unrealized projects, which only become a reality by being published. In the artworld people usually don't talk about these forgotten projects, and yet every great artist has wonderful unrealized works...

AG: Yes, in fact we've talked about this before, because I contributed the Brick Man to your Unrealized Utopias...

HUO: I remember it well, it's in my book.

AG: And I still hope, maybe, to make it. From being 40 meters high, it's now a 100-metre high useless building in human form that I want to build in Beijing with bricks from all over China, every brick signed by a living person and placed within the structure according to their compressive and tensile strength. It's made like a basket - there is no internal crossing structure - so you can stand inside, in this very dark space. There are only two windows at the position of the ears, that would be about 700 millimeters square. You would have to get used to the light, filtering through the circle of the neck.

HUO: So the orifices of the ear would be the light orifices?

AG: Yes, the only source of light.

HUO: Not the mouth?

AG: No.

HUO: And not the eyes?

AG: No. Only the ears. In Allotment, you have no eyes, but you have ears, and you do have a mouth. But that idea of blindness, it's a big question. How do you use material means to overcome the limitations of vision? This is the biggest single problematic of my work. For the first 20 years, I was making these hermetic lead boxes in human form that were about the condition of being, and were entirely dependent on a notion of empathy that I didn't have any right to expect, and as a result that work is a failure. I was trying to find a relationship between imaginative and actual space and it didn't work. But nevertheless they were all architecture; they were all containers of space, in space at large. Now that I've moved from this indexical register of a body in space to working more with fields and frames, rooms and architecture, perhaps that attempt to make a bridge between mind and space and extended space will become more graspable.

HUO: So that is another new dimension in the work; it's all these fields which are now floating in your studio, some of which were already at the Hayward... But now there are many more...

AG: Yes, the floating condition is important. But maybe we didn't really get to grips with this architecture issue?

HUO: It's good to talk about it a little bit more because it's something hasn't been significantly covered in any of your interviews. But also because I feel it's an important chapter as we're here in a building that David Chipperfield built for you as a studio, and you've always had dialogues and friendships with architects. So let's speak about these two things: first a little bit about the pavilion you designed with Chipperfield for Kivik Art '08 in Southeast Scania (Sweden), your first architecture, and then also your dialogue with architects.

AG: Yes. I'm the artistic advisor on the memorial designed by Carmody Groarke to commemorate the London bombings of 7/7... But I'll try to describe Sculpture for the Subjective Experience of Architecture, the work that I made with David. It's a direct follow-on from Breathing Room, except we're working with enclosure. So it's three identical volumes of 100 cubic meters that lock one into the other: the cave, to the stage, to the tower, made quite massively out of 600 tones of concrete. The first volume is a pierced block that has an entranceway and a staircase. In the second, two walls are missing, so you have an immediate sense of vertigo; this space looks out onto the trees that surround the pavilion, and there is no view, apart from the leaves and the branches. You then go up the tower in a spiral staircase, at the top of which you are released above the canopy and can look out to the horizon of the Baltic. The whole piece is made from cast concrete made in planks, 250 millimeters deep: you feel the weight and mass of the structure. All the steps and all the physical activity within the building are exaggerated. Normally a step is 170 millimeters, these are 250 millimeters high: you're using more energy, and going up the tower, it's very dark because there are just small holes, rather like the holes in Allotment, that just give you glimpses out into the landscape, but don't provide enough light to see your immediate environment. So you're really working quite hard to orientate yourself. And then rather like a birth canal, you're released at the end, to the horizon.

HUO: The sun is gone but there is a light.

AG: To me it's very exciting. It is a useless building, but unlike the Brick Man project, this has no allusions to human form. We're allowing one person in at a time so that people can concentrate on the sensations of the quality of light, enclosure and exposure.

HUO: Now, the pavilion is built, but there any other unrealized projects?

AG: Yes, I have an idea for a 48-storey inhabitable sculpture that I wanted to build above the Arctic Circle in the tundra, a completely empty natural environment. It picks up on the aspirations of early Modernist architects like Bruno Taut, this ant-hill in human form that derives its own electricity and energy from deep earth probes, but glows like a photo-luminescent marine creature at night, surrounded by deep, dark forest and standing in a river.

Anyway, this is my ambition. And so you could have an apartment in the head, a gym in the stomach...

But the biggest utopian project as a whole is simply to make a space underground that would be my dialogue with the Pantheon, which would be a hall for the peoples of the earth. This is a Field project. Field alludes to the collective body of humankind, all brought to one place and looking to a common future, but I thought how wonderful if we could really do that for real. So my ambition was to combine the forces of NATO, the Soviet Union and China, to come together in Azerbaijan and, rather than doing military exercises that would prepare them for mutual destruction, to make this Pantheon for the 21st century that is about a collective thinking space for a collective human future. We are all aware of finite resources, and that the growing human population is not sustainable. So how can we take the energy of the animal imperative to continually fight over resources, and do something creative with the bigger challenge that the planet itself is offering us? The idea is to use the energy of a collective of armies to make an open space that has nothing in it apart from the seeds of hope for a collective future.

HUO: That is a fantastic utopia! Now you've mentioned Bruno Taut, but who are the other architects who really inspired you? I ask this because one interviewer tried earlier to pin you down on Le Corbusier, but you kind of escaped it and said Allotment is more Malevich than Corbusier. Bruno Taut is interesting, and so are the whole Gläserne Kette.

AG: I respect the rational industrial aesthetic of Gropius and the Dessau Bauhaus and its democratic ideal, and Le Corbusier too, of course, particularly his confidence in what architecture could achieve socially, but it is ironic that his best work is a church: Ronchamp. I love the radical and wide-looking spirit of Buckminster Fuller and his intellectual engineering. But in terms of the spaces and places that inspire me most, they are often not architecture: the Gouffre de Padirac, zeppelin halls, Alpine tunnels (they have a good one in Bregenz), the rail hall of Frankfurt train station by Schwedler, the bunkers of the North Atlantic wall - spaces that are sublime, through the volume that either is contained or compressed - and ones that have a strong relationship to geology. They come close to the abstractions of Boullée. I admire the architecture of Rodney Gordon - both the Tricorn Centre in Portsmouth and the Gateshead multi-storey carpark had a sculptural and physical presence that is hard to match in post-war English architecture. And also Louis Khan, probably because of his association with a deeper history of architecture and place. I love Sinan, the builder of Hagia Sophia: what an incredible space, what an incredible idea, this floating dome that is held by light.

HUO: The Pantheon in Rome. As Alighiero Boetti told me, 'my beloved Pantheon.'

AG: The Pantheon, absolutely. Extraordinary building. I once lay for an hour in Cheops' tomb in the middle of the Great Pyramid in Giza, a building of the most abstract spatial geometry with this concentrated space in the middle of it. The reason that I love Khan and particularly the parliament buildings he made for Bangladesh is this allusion to mass space and material, and the preservation of the continuity of architectural languages. I went to the body in my work because I wanted to start again with a common language. But at the same time I want to also build on the bravery and utopian spirit of the early Modernists. I think we've become very obsessed with our own ability to manipulate language, but we haven't been challenging ourselves enough with what we want to say with it.

HUO: And that could also be extrapolated to architecture maybe as well... I've just been to Ahmadabad to see Khan's management school.

AG: Yes, he uses brick in an incredible way. The reason that I love David Chipperfield is because he has a real engagement with materiality. He's not prepared to simply talk about surfaces or exploit the forms that come out of advanced computer design. He wants to talk about a relationship with the ground, with the azimuth of the sun, and to look at the vernacular use of particular materials in the zone of the building. This building [the studio] is so modest - it's built like a factory, he's done it in the simplest possible way - but there's something about the way that he's articulated scale and light. He said, 'Here is a meat-packing district. What is the typology of the buildings that surround it?' He's kept these cold store doors? It's fundamentally about listening very carefully to the inherent forms that are telling a story about how things can be made in this place. I respect the humility of David's architecture. Also, his acknowledgement of all the key Modernists, whether it's Mies Van der Rohe or Mendelsohn, or looking further at the great German architects, of Klenze and Schinkel.

HUO: This leads us back to your exhibition in Mexico, and coming back to that I think the architectural aspect of the show is extremely significant, because there's going to be Breathing Room, a new Allotment, that room you were describing with bread - that's all very architectural...

AG: And then there's Firmament II. You saw Firmament at White Cube?

HUO: Yes, Firmament, yes.

AG: I'm making a new Firmament specifically for a space in MARCO Monterrey, which is a response to this building by Ricardo Legoretta.

HUO: Legoretta is very inspired by Barragán. As Lygia Pape said on Barragán, 'The formula is: space color light = invention!'

AG: Yes, so it's highly colorful, very much about play of light and volumes, it's very sculptural. I think the work is going to be a sort of foil to that, and the Firmament that we're making there is far more compressed than the London one. I'm trying to use this enormous museum so that its extraordinary range of spaces is somehow activated, in the same way that I used the bunker architecture of the Hayward as a sort of sounding board for questioning the whole condition of the second body (I think of architecture as the second body). What do we feel in terms of these dialectics between shelter and exposure; exposure to views, light, and the geology that surrounds this space? And the wonderful thing about Monterrey is the mountains.
