

# ANTONY GORMLEY

## CONVERSATION WITH PAULO HERKENHOFF

Antony Gormley, the artist behind the first IHME Project, CLAY AND THE COLLECTIVE BODY, and art historian Paulo Herkenhoff discuss Gormley's participatory work that took place in Helsinki. This conversation took place on April 4 2009 at the Old Student House in Helsinki as part of the IHME Days program.

This text is an edited version of the discussion.

Antony Gormley: Hello everybody, it's very nice to be here again. There's less snow this time, which is a bit sad because the dome looked so beautiful in the snow. To my eye, it was a kind of pneumatic Inuit dwelling that came to land like a spaceship in the middle of your beautiful city.

I haven't seen Paulo for a few years, so we have a bit of catching up to do. Paulo, ask me a question!

Paulo Herkenhoff: There are a few issues which I would like to raise. The first one derives from the title itself: the idea of a collective body, plus a collective unconscious, which was something that Olle Granath mentioned here earlier today. The second would be how you operate symbolic negotiation. And the third issue would be an economy: a symbolic economy within the work, entropy, joy and inactuality.

AG: That's a small book that I hope Paulo will write. Where to begin? I have been away from the project for five days and I just have to say it's absolutely incredible how something that we began in the first few hours has been continued, deepened and has become richer. Let's start with entropy: here things are being destroyed by the very act of being viewed. At first I had a natural reaction of wanting to protect these fragile things; the fruits of other people's work. Whereas now I feel that actually it's not so bad that we see this landscape both in its moment of becoming but also of disintegration. Maybe that's necessary: a foil to a concern with the exchange value of artworks. Shiny objects are becoming typical of the high production values of late late-modernism and the imposition of 'finishedness.' This project is the absolute counterpoint; about an endless making and unmaking, where you can take what you have made, and what you don't take will go back into the gardens. Here is a built-in understanding that the energy exchange remains in a closed system: a windowless, warm, wet space in which the fluid imagination of the subject is allowed to make impressions in an inert receiving material. It is all about a process that has absolute value because it's about the reinforcement of the subject, both as investigator (the curious mind), and as producer (the creative mind). For me, this level entropic field is the progeny of this cube, which actually helped us a bit by self-destructing at the beginning of the project. And from that point onwards the action of touch and time were equal. This project celebrates the dual nature of experience: moments of origin, but also places in memory, a potent place for the conservation of objects. Entropy, or the evidence of entropy, is an important trigger for this transformation from origination to memory. The project as a whole was a game, but also a serious investigation of how we are all makers. We betray something of ourselves if we forget that we are all making a world and that we are all in that sense creators and artists.

PH: I would ask for permission to speak about how I relate to the project.

AG: Yes, I want to hear!

PH: It's personal; excuse me for taking it this way. When I entered I had this sensation of an aftermath, a battlefield, an attack, something maybe like the remnants of a cannibal banquet. And today when Olle Granath showed again Goya's SATURN DEVOURING HIS SON, which in a way represents the sensation I had, I made the connection with today's discussion.

AG: That's because you missed the penis phase.

PH: Yes.

AG: You came in at the skull phase. Well, there was one skull when I left.

PH: Now there are many.

AG: But now, I don't know what happened, death is talking.

PH: So I decided that I would put myself in the state of perception, in a phenomenological state, and forget whatever I could think rationally. I did some automatic writing: object, sex, entropy or whatever. There are many penises. So I thought whatever would appear, I would start to write it down. But then I fixed upon the cannibal issues, and the entropy. And I understood that I would destroy the work myself in two ways. Firstly, by accident: I have to say that I have certain problem with my vision. I have a small blind area on my right side. It takes time for me to focus. So I knew things that were on my right side . . .

AG: ... were in danger.

PH: They were in danger. Some, not many, just one or two pieces were destroyed, suffered from this physical entropy of my body being there. The second entropy would be a decision: I touched it, I did what I wanted to do. I made a piece and did not wash my hands until lunch time. So when I went to lunch I had earth on my hands and I wanted to eat that earth but I could not eat like that so I decided that I somehow would have to consume part of it.

AG: You are really getting into it!

PH: That's what you proposed, that was the idea. The issue of entropy was something that, in a way, you prepared: something either planned or considered. Perhaps it wasn't that you prepared it, but let's say that it was at

least within your consideration. You allowed room for chance. So on the first day, I was trying to understand the form of the initial block, the rationality of it, how it was put there, the weight (how many tons), the quality of the humidity, the level of humidity. That was the rational part. And then come these aspects of it being consumed and retransformed. I don't think it is really a deconstruction. I'd like to ask you about your proposition that process and imagination are so important. What, for you, is this wish for clay? This material will, as in Bachelard, that we have inside us? How do you feel about this?

AG: As a material, it is earth, that's all you have to say. This is about reconnecting flesh with earth through touch. And for me, yes, it has this mythic element, whether it's the Akkadian myths from Mesopotamia, or biblical myths in Judaism and Christianity, about making consciousness from the earth. The moment of making with clay is a primary experience. I think it has taken eighteen years to think of a better idea than FIELD.\* With FIELD the repeated rhythm of taking a hand-size ball of clay and forming it in the hands was what allowed the form to arise. When you pick something up it comes into the orbit of your intimate body zone. Like FIELD, this work in Helsinki is also concerned with making a landscape, and with geology. There is a contrast between intimacy and distance, both in time and space. Somebody working the clay works on it in the zone between speaking and the heart, then they put it away and leave it. This is similar to the economy of FIELD, which is an unconscious transmission. Perhaps I'm being a bit over poetic about this. But the fact is that for most of us now, since we've been living in the urban grid, earth is not something that we touch, in the way that we would have done as farmers. If you think about the Neolithic revolution, its part in the generation of human consciousness. We have spent longer dealing with the earth than not dealing with it. This is a modern problem: that earth is covered. So the idea of getting back in touch is an atavistic, regressive kakapoopoo but it is also about touch reconnecting flesh and earth.

PH: I would like to ask you about some of the philosophical background, because you are an artist who really has a philosophical background, a spiritual background. Those are issues that for me are very interesting. When you mention the relationship between earth and flesh, what immediately comes to my mind is a passage from Paul Valéry in which he says that painter lends his or her body to make the world; he lends his or her body to transform the world into painting. And there is a construct from that point in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in EYE AND MIND (L'OEIL ET L'ESPRIT). After Merleau-Ponty's death his ideas on the 'fleshness' of the world have surfaced, the fleshness of history, the fleshness of language. And I see in your work this sense of vital fleshness coming from a very primitive moment, from a very primal instance, and then attaining a very high level of philosophical aspects, of economic aspects (as mentioned earlier, in terms of the exchange values of things) and psychological aspects. Number is very important for you, but it's not about the banking economy. Number means as many people as you can include and aiming at an infinity of possibilities. The more the better, so that you can establish the individual difference more deeply. It seems that the ideal work that you might have in mind is to one day have everyone in the world do something together at the same time.

AG: Yes, that would be lovely.

PH: Not one single person left out.

AG: We'd have to get DHL to deliver balls of clay to everyone. You know they always say that "we can get it anywhere". They have this guy with the parcel going through the snow drifts; I love the idea that if everybody could get it delivered. . . And for a moment, as when there is a one-minute silence, we could have coherence. It's a beautiful idea.

PH: It's in the logic of the work, I think.

AG: I think in the background of all this is certainly Heidegger's phenomenological distinction between the earth as something that we inherit and the world as something we make. In a post-religious and post-political ideological vacuum, the issue is the recovery of an agency. Whether we recognise it or not, each of us is an agent; making the world out of the earth. Most of us are asleep, or blind, due to the visual turn, celebrity culture, advertising, television and all the mediatization of life. The reason that the pneumatic building for this project had no windows, and the reason that I was the only person, I hope, with a camera, was that I wanted to return people to the fact that, on a very basic level, we are all makers. But obviously we do that, we 'make', even when we talk on the telephone. What I mean is that when we have a conversation we are re-translating our experience into something that we are giving to the world, even if it is only to one other person. And that's a creative act. But perhaps we undervalue it. In terms of number, I was originally going for a 6 x 6 x 6 meter cube, but the clay would not allow for that height. In the end, because we ended up with 100 tons of clay and this abstract absolute (hundreds are what the economists use), it's a kind of industrialisation of mathematics, as a rational measure of human productivity. We took those abstractions and the 'cubeness' that refers back to so many things - to the black square of Malevich, to the Kaaba, to that idea of absolute mass as in a work by Serra, for example, but then it went from this absolute abstractly quantified mass to a value that is only about difference. My daughter Paloma wrote an essay recently in which she said: "If we were better able to express our differences, perhaps we would understand them better." I think this project is very much about that. I think it's not just about differences; it's also about cultural transmission, because the skulls that arrived and multiplied and the balls that got out of the ball grid are all examples of the way in which people also want to try what somebody else has done for themselves and take it somewhere else. This is an idea that struck me very much at the beginning: people, not everyone, but some, wanting to mark their territory, to put a line around it in order to have a territory; that idea that this is 'my patch' and I can do whatever I want in it. And then how that broke down, and how other people came and made connections between those islands of isolated activity.

PH: I think in this respect the work is very paradigmatic. It confronts with two things: Marx and Freud; monopoly and narcissism. Those two territories are totally in crisis in your proposal. Even if you try to, it's going to go to ruin, it's going to crack, and somehow it's going to be lost. I'm sorry to have interrupted you.

AG: No, no, I was drivelling on. I think this balance between economy and psychology, or the balance between the absolute conditions of livelihood in economic terms and then the absolute necessities of sex and death, is part of the syntax here.

PH: One can notice the impulses of death and of life, the instincts of death and of life; the big clash. When I imagined this cube, which was there already in that state of entropy, this is not how I would describe it now. But I would describe it as a living matter which is changing constantly. It took me to another situation in Scandinavia: Manzoni's SOCLE DU MONDE (1961), this sculpture that consists in a block which functions as a pedestal for the Earth. And then the world is "upside down". It is as if there was a reversal in our perception. It is very political. This piece in Denmark took the responsibility of focusing on the world itself, no?

AG: It's in Herning. In the middle of the middle island. I know it quite well because I have a piece that's just next door to it. I have always loved it. And

yes, I've tried to reverse it. It's the idea of the clay cube sitting on top of the world, or rather, stuck on its side as a kind of concentration, something to concentrate on.

PH: We know that in cartography orientation is a European construction, we see Europe at the top of the map, and so forth. But still, that mythology, that myth or that image, is now incorporated in everyone. So the first time I came to Scandinavia I had the sensation of being at the top of the world. And I know that the SOCLE DU MONDE means... how do you say it in English?

AG: The base of the world.

PH: It was totally logical that Manzoni's piece was built somewhere in Scandinavia, instead of Patagonia, Argentina. Because its dealing with the imaginary, of course. But let's bring in the issue of Scandinavia, Finland, Helsinki. This becomes the next issue for me: the sense of place, the sense of belonging and engaging with people. You give the sensation that you don't travel, that you have always been where you are working, metaphorically, of course. It seems that you were always in Helsinki. Because the way you approach a group of people and a society, it's as if you'd been there for ever, as if you had always been there. Because of the kind of intimacy and recognition that you have, people enter into a dialogue. And, of course, it must be a natural disposition; there is a lot of political construction, philosophical construction, as a kind of set of values for life and for art. Could you tell us a little bit more about how you approach a situation; not a physical space, of course, but a space that is always cultural, political and sociological?

AG: You are being very kind, but I'm not sure that that's true. I do move about a lot, but I think. . .

PH: No, you move a lot, but my feeling is that China is where you have always been, and the Amazon, you have always been there, the way you immediately establish these relationships; the way you recognise and are recognised.

AG: I think we are in danger of thinking of me as the author here, and there are so many authors here. . . I did some stuff, but most of it fell over. It's really just about opening the studio door or saying that the studio is everywhere. The studio is also inside people's heads; you open the door and say: "Come in, let's do something". You can reconnect with that moment, which is the same as when you give a piece of paper and pencil to a six year old! We are being very clever here but there wasn't any need to say anything to anybody. It was so clear right from the beginning that everybody understood.

PH: The first one was acquainted with the situation. The first person who approached was someone who was trained, instructed. The third one I could understand, but the first one. . .

AG: That's a good point; we did have our 'mentor-monitors': friends who were part of the project. But I think that it would be very useful in fact to ask if there are people here who were there on the first day, and if so what their experience was, because I can't speak for them. The communication here was entirely through the clay. We can talk about this thing as if it was some kind of an artistic product but I'm not so sure what it is; it is totally open, it is what it is for each and every one of us that encounters it. I feel incredibly privileged to have been invited to use these resources. We have been lucky - it could have not worked: the wind could have slammed shut that studio door. It is also a tribute to the fact that in Finland silence is not an enemy.

PH: Then we have a difference here in your work, because in FIELD you said you asked people to become an equivalent of yourself and here you did not. So there is a difference of...

AG: Yes, absolutely, it was important to me there were no instructions.

PH: So here it is totally nonverbal; let's say, it's done through the clay. I feel that you mention two things here. Firstly: you mention reconnecting. And I felt that there was a kind of religious aspect; not religious in terms of a canon, but a certain notion of religion as religare as binding or reconnecting people. And I was yesterday also talking to Olle Granath, mentioning this passage by Derrida in which he asks: Can we pray when we don't understand what we are saying, but can we pray together? And that was my feeling there, of this religare, this reconnection. The other thing: when you refuse the role of the artist, you are the provider, the one who brings the clay together with other people, who physically brings the clay. And I think there you bring other notions of authorship: authorship in crisis. Let's phrase it in terms of Roland Barthes and the death of the author: the presence of the reader will mean the death of the author. And literature is a big construction, a big network of ideas. Then we have Harold Bloom's THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE, more so between authors themselves. And finally, we have Walter Benjamin's notion of the artist as a producer. So someone is producing, but you say you are not producing?

AG: I think it's a co-production. I could have done a big work. There were plenty of ideas going around. There could have been in a way a more traditional production, and it is to Pro Arte Foundation Finland's credit that they went for the risky option. This piece has more relevance than any of the other ideas. And I'm just not so bothered about the author issue. The game of branding has to be replaced by something else, something more like the collective adventure of discovering some objective correlative for the way we feel. Art is not an object, it's a place of exchange, where somehow all of us can help each other to discover what we fear and what we love. I would really love to hear from any of you who were there in the process, just to answer Paolo's first question, what happened?

Project participant (1): What do you want to know?

AG: Just how you reacted to that, to those first moments, to the clay, the space, whatever. How did you feel, what did it feel like?

Project participant (1): We were a few people, who walked in, and the room was totally white, and the cube was quite still, quite standing, and I think we were just first kind of confused by it. At first I think people were just a little bit watching the cube and walking around and ... we were looking at each other, like what can we do. You know, should we start talking to each other, something like this. Then I noticed there were some people - I guess they didn't know each other - they just started doing a big thing by themselves, together. It was kind of confusing.

AG: So what did you do? In the end?

Project participant (1): It was a funny thing, I haven't touched clay for ten years and I loved it when I was a child. Very much. Taking clay from the

earth in the backyard of our house here in Helsinki, and it was very touching, and I started drawing with it, because of the floor and we were there with my husband just for a few hours, or two hours, and then we had to go, and I was so sad to leave. I felt like that this play, or 'leikki:' we say in Finnish 'leikki,' oh this is this game I know. And I feel it again. So I thought it was very touching and I was so sad to leave and then I went back a few days later and then it was totally full.

AG: I remember now what you did, you did those circles and where the circles touched another circle you made a tiny little column, which could have been a tree or could have been a person. That was beautiful because you began something about marking, about mapping, about making a drawing, about thinking about that floor as a landscape. And then other people came after you and either copied your circles or took them into spirals or made more of the little standing things. And I was very aware that where you started, which was behind the cube, had from the very beginning a very particular feel. Almost from the beginning there were pioneers, people who started their own thing, and after that when new people arrived they would walk around and try to find a neighbourhood where they felt comfortable; somewhere which felt like their kind of place. It was really lovely that, from very early on, there was a neighbourhood thing happening, and also a sense that people would come, like you, and not know what to do, but get an idea from what somebody else had done. Or anyway their fear of the blank piece of paper or of 'Oh my god, somehow I've got to do something I have to prove myself' - that went away because there was plenty of examples of what other people had done, and somehow that allowed you to do anything.

Project participant (2): I think one of the best things about it was actually maybe something quite trivial; that nobody was allowed to make photographs or use mobile phones and that there was good food to eat. These seem maybe irrelevant, but they created an atmosphere that you could actually totally focus on the experience itself.

AG: I was thrilled about the room, it is like an amniotic sac, and it has no windows, and we really were making a world that was different from the world outside. It could have been a bit warmer. When it was minus 15 outside it would have been nice if it had been a little bit warmer. But on the whole, it's about just having the space to do nothing but be on the floor and play, a playground for everyone, children and adults alike. This is a place of possibility. We have it when we go to the beach, don't we? When we sit on the beach together, particularly with families, it's immediate - you relax and you start making sandcastles or whatever. There was a bit of that kind of feeling. I'm glad that you mentioned the food, as this was important also for me: the support of the body, the relationship between the reception room and the making space. The fact that you were going to be looked after, that was not so dissimilar from a nursery or a school or a hospital or whatever. That somehow your bodily needs were taken care of. The idea was that you should feel free, free to do something that you don't do normally. That is a kind of blessing, it's rare. Any other questions or comments?

Project participant (3): Mine is a comment, because I just wanted to say how it felt being together. I was not in the first days, but when I came I was a little bit terrified, there were so many clay works already around, and it was like scary to do anything. And then I found a little patch and realised what I could do. But soon the situation changed, there were some people, we discussed a little bit, and we felt that we could do something together and I found that the most beautiful thing and I returned another day and immediately I started working with somebody, and that was really beautiful.

AG: The first example of working together happened by accident. We had invited some people because Paula and Tuula were very worried that if we were going to have this six-meter high cube people were going to fall off. So we invited climbers. Anyway they came and because the cube had already collapsed and because it was now only two meters sixty, as opposed to six meters high, they didn't need to do any climbing. And they were already friends and together they made this elf with the upturned toes sitting on the toilet. Working together happened a lot afterwards and was good. Maybe they hadn't had the opportunity before. Any other questions or comments, or. . . ?

Project participant (4): I would like to continue on this working together theme. I went there alone one morning, last Thursday, I think. And like the others have said, it was quite shocking, I didn't really know what to expect. But I really couldn't have imagined it was so full of the most amazing sculptures, it was kind of like entering a surreal world all of the sudden. And I haven't really worked with clay, so I was taking some in my hands and thinking what could I do. I think that feeling of being a child again, suddenly, and thinking, God I can play with this thing, actually I don't have to do anything, this isn't an individualistic exercise, suddenly made me feel really free and exactly this kind of playfulness. So, I did a few little things and I realised that I haven't done anything with clay, but it was really good fun. But then I discovered this other work that someone had started, which kind of inspired me and for the rest of the time I worked with that. And when my time finished I hadn't kind of finished it at all, and then that sort of process was maybe the most amazing in this world, that you were the part of a continuum. Though I worked alone there, I was continuing somebody else's work and I knew when I left there that somebody else would probably pick it up and go on and that was really liberating, I think.

AG: Have you been back to see what happened?

Project participant (4): Not yet, I think I'll go tomorrow. So thank you for facilitating this thing, I think it was such a nice contrast to this world that we live in where individual achievement is overrated and puts a lot of pressure on people. It was really nice to be part of this process, thank you.

AG: Don't thank me. I have to say that it's a total miracle that we got away with it. It's down to the generosity of the sponsor of Pro Arte Foundation Finland and indeed Paula Toppila who facilitated this. I did very little except talk to her on the telephone, often many times a day.

\*The concept of Antony Gormley's collective artwork entitled FIELD is to take the clay of a region and fashion it into many thousands of surrogate body-forms with the collaboration of local people, working to three rules: the individual forms should be hand-sized, have eyes and stand vertically. All else is left to the maker. The first project, AMERICAN FIELD, was made in 1990 in Cholula Mexico and has 35,000 pieces. The most recent, ASIAN FIELD, has 210,000 figures. So far there have six FIELD projects on four Continents.

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