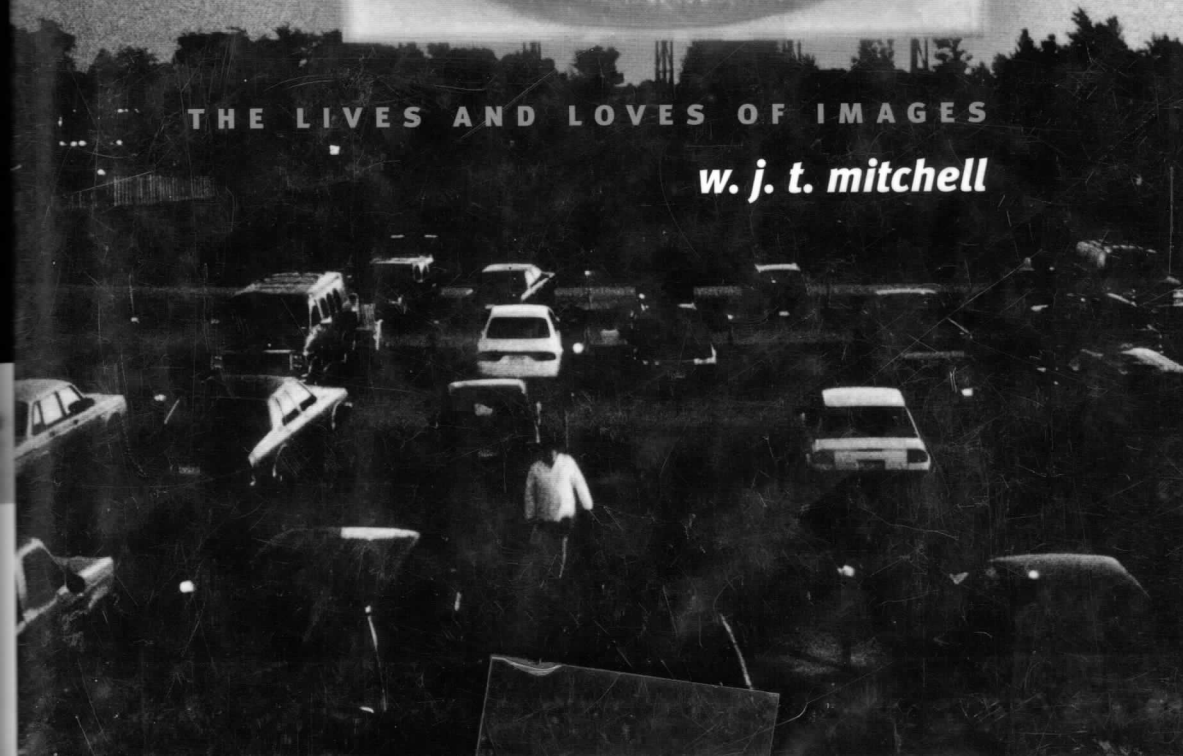


**what  
do  
pictures  
want?**



THE LIVES AND LOVES OF IMAGES

*w. j. t. mitchell*



## What Sculpture Wants

### Placing Antony Gormley

The continuation into the twentieth century of a traditional treatment of the human figure is not given a place in these pages.

ROSALIND KRAUSS, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977)

Sculpture: the embodiment of the truth of Being in its work of instituting places.

MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *"Art and Space"* (1969)

It is undeniable that from man, as from a perfect model, statues and pieces of sculpture . . . were first derived.

GIORGIO VASARI, *Lives of the Artists* (1568)

After architecture, sculpture is the most ancient, conservative, and intractable of the media. "The material in which God worked to fashion the first man was a lump of clay," notes Vasari, and the result was a kind of defiant self-portrait, since God took himself as the model and formed Adam (or Adam and Eve together) "in his image" (fig. 53). You know the rest of the story. God breathes life into the clay figures. They have minds of their own, rebel against their Creator, and are punished for it by being condemned to leave their paradisaal home and work all their lives, only to die and return to the shapeless matter from which they emerged. Variations of this myth appear in many cultures and materials: Prometheus's creation of man from clay; the Jewish Golem; the clay statuettes animated by the Great Spirit in Hopi legend; Pygmalion falling in love with his own statue; "the modern Prometheus," Dr. Frankenstein, who uses dead bodies as material for his re-

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bellious creatures; the metallic humanoids of contemporary science fiction, the “posthuman” creatures known as robots and cyborgs (fig. 54).

There is a kind of circular process at work here. Man is both the sculpted object and the sculpting agent, both created as and creator of sculpted images. God introduces man and other creatures into the world by means of the art of sculpture. Then man brings sculpture (and gods) into the world by creating material images of himself and other creatures. The dangerous moment, of course, is always the moment of animation, when the sculpted object takes on “a life of its own.” The God of monotheism, the deity of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, understands that image-making as such is a dangerous business, and establishes an absolute prohibition on it. Let me quote once again the words of the second commandment:

*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. (Exod. 20:4–6 [KJV])*

This is not some minor prohibition. It is the absolutely foundational commandment, the one that marks the boundary between the faithful and the pagans, the chosen people and the gentiles. Its violation (which seems all but inevitable) is the occasion for terrible punishment, as the episode of the golden calf suggests. When Aaron, the Hebrews’ master sculptor, sets up the calf as a god to “go before” the Israelites in place of their lost leader, Moses, God commands the destruction of the statue and the massacre of some three thousand of his people. Idolatry is the one sin that God cannot forgive, since it is a direct threat to his status as the one and only god, and therefore the one and only being capable of creating living images. Man is prohibited from making images just as surely as he was prohibited from eating from the tree of knowledge, and for the same reason. Image-making, like thinking for yourself, is a dangerously godlike activity.

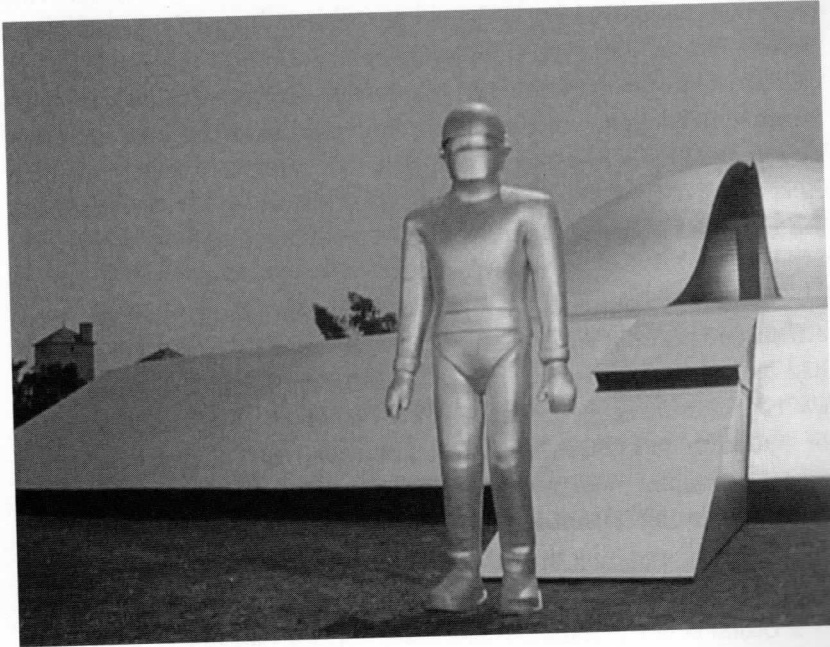
Vasari understood that this story spelled trouble for the arts, and especially the art of sculpture. So he resorts to a familiar distinction: “it was the worship given to statues, not the making of them, which was wickedly sinful.”<sup>1</sup> Vasari then cites the usual precedents: “the art of design and of

1. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists* [1568], vol. 1, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 25.



FIGURE 53  
Antony Gormley forming a sculpture.  
From the production of Gormley's  
*American Field*, December 1990.  
Courtesy of the artist and Jay Jopling /  
White Wise.

FIGURE 54  
The robot Gort. Still from *The Day the  
Earth Stood Still* (dir. Robert Wise,  
1951).



sculpture, in all kinds of metal as well as marble, was taught by God. . . . They made the two golden cherubim, the candlesticks, and the veil, and the hems of the sacerdotal vestments, all the beautiful casts for the Tabernacle" (1:26–27). He finesses the question of images of the human form, and ignores (as he must) the clear language of the second commandment, which prohibits "the making" of statues as such, not just the worship of them. I have remarked previously on the slippery-slope principle at work: if one allows human beings to make statues or images of any kind, the images will sooner or later take on a life of their own, and ultimately become objects of worship. Better to stop the whole process at its origin, or insist on arts that refuse all image-making, figuration, or representation, arts of pure ornamentation or abstraction. Sculpture, especially that modeled on the human body, is not only the first but also the most dangerous of the arts. It impiously elevates the human image to the status of a god, reifies mortal men into immortal idols, and degrades spirit into dead matter. Sometimes it seems as if sculpture achieves its truest vocation not when it is erected but when it is pulled down (plate 13).

Let us fast-forward now to the present day, when these archaic and mythical taboos on sculpture seem at best a faint and distant memory. What place does sculpture have in the contemporary system of the arts? Has it been swallowed up, along with photography, painting, collage, and technical media, into an overarching art of spectacle, display, installation, and environmental design, a mediascape of infinitely malleable and dematerialized images? Or does it have a distinctive role to play as a specific medium linked with its immeasurably long and deep history? What role, more specifically, does sculpture oriented toward the human body have to play in our time?

Certainly sculpture played a key role in the unfolding of artistic modernism and postmodernism. Every abstract movement in modern painting had its sculptural counterpart. Minimalist sculpture and the readymade even dared to challenge painting in its quest for supremacy in the negation of figuration and representation. Sculpture in the sixties expressed concerns, as sculptor Robert Morris put it, "not only distinct but hostile to those of painting."<sup>2</sup> Paintings, as Michael Fried laments, began to take on "objecthood," asserting their three-dimensional physical presence in real

2. Quoted in W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 243.

space, or becoming themselves something like cabinets for the storage of more objects of three-dimensional manipulation.

But sculpture, whether it obeyed Fried's modernist imperative (exemplified by David Smith and Anthony Caro) of virtuality, opticality, gestural significance, and antitheatrical autonomy or asserted itself in what Rosalind Krauss called its "expanded field," has still seemed to many a kind of homeless art. Does it belong in a sculpture garden? A special wing of the museum? Next to an architectural monument, like the parsley garnish next to a roast? An ornament to the public plaza as an invisible prop, like the typical work of "public art"? An obtrusive barrier, like Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (fig. 55)? Or off in the wilderness, a disappeared monument, like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (fig. 56)?

The question of place, site, or location has always been a central issue for sculpture. Unlike painting, it normally does not carry its frame with it, and is thus much more sensitive to issues of placement. It does not project a virtual space, opening a window into immensity as, say, landscape painting does; it *takes up* space, moves in and occupies a site, obtruding on it or changing it. It risks failure on two fronts, by being too obtrusive (Serra) or too passive (the statue as perch for pigeons). There seems to be an ideal middle place, a utopia for sculpture, hinted at in the notion of *genius loci*, the spirit of the place embodied in some sculptural figure<sup>3</sup> that seems to belong to the place, express its inner being, and "activate" the place by incarnating its special character.

But this notion of sculpture as rooted in a specific place, organically connected with its site, seems like an archaic and nostalgic residue, perhaps appropriate for a primitive sedentary society deeply connected to the land. It reeks of Heideggerian mysticism, of clearings in the wilderness, "the release of places at which a god appears."<sup>4</sup> What possible application could it have for modern cultures caught up in vortices of mobility, flow, and instantaneous global communication?

Antony Gormley's sculpture strikes me as important for our moment and his medium precisely because it constitutes a profound reflection on the *place* of and as sculpture—not only its physical and institutional sites,

3. "Sculpture would not deal with space. . . . Sculpture would be the embodiment of places." Martin Heidegger, "Die Kunst und der Raum" (St. Gallen: Erker Verlag, 1969), trans. Charles Seibert as "Art and Space," *Man and World* 1 (1973): 3–7.

4. Martin Heidegger, "Art and Space," 7.



FIGURE 55  
Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, 1981;  
overhead view of installation,  
Federal Plaza, New York City.  
© 2003 Richard Serra. Photo-  
graph courtesy Richard Serra.

its location among the arts and media, but also the sculptural work as itself a place or space as well as an object in space. As Heidegger puts it, “things themselves are places and do not merely belong to a place” (6). This is especially true when the *thing* is a human body or a sculptural representation of it. The human body is the most highly charged place in our experience. It is at once an inescapable prison and the portal to every conceivable flight of fantasy. Like sculpture itself, it is ancient, intractable, and conservative, yet capable of being refashioned, altered, and sculpted.

Gormley’s work gives profound expression to the question of what sculpture wants—that is, both what it desires or longs for, and what it *lacks*—in our time and (as I shall argue) in any time whatsoever. What sculpture wants is a place, a site, a location both literally and figuratively, and Gormley’s work provides a profound expression of this longing for space. Like the naked human body which is its first model, it is both a



FIGURE 56

Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970; aerial view of installation, Great Salt Lake, Utah. Black rock, salt crystals, earth, and red water (algae),  $3\frac{1}{2} \times 15 \times 1,500'$ . Estate of Robert Smithson, courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York. Collection: DIA Center for the Arts, New York. Photograph by Gianfranco Gorgoni. Art © Estate of Robert Smithson/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

homeless wanderer, an exile from the Edenic utopia where it was the genius of the place, and itself the home that it can never completely abandon. Sculpture wants a place to be *and* to be a place.

I know that these remarks convict me on at least two fronts of being out of step with contemporary thinking about the arts and many other matters. First, by attributing desires to sculpture, to a medium and to the specific images that appear within it, I seem to be flirting with a form of animism or totemism, personifying inanimate objects as well as the entire set of practices (the medium) in which those objects are produced.<sup>5</sup> Second, by suggesting that there is a transcendental or at least abiding set of problems associated with the medium of sculpture, I may seem to be lapsing into an

5. See my essay, "What Do Pictures *Really* Want?" in *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 71–82 for further reflections on the question of desire and lack in representational forms.



ahistorical formalism. The reader will have to trust me for the moment that my position is not quite that simple. My real conviction is that it is only by risking the exploration of the deeply abiding conditions of an artistic medium that we can hope to specify its historical modulations with any precision.<sup>6</sup> And only by exploring the human attribution of agency, aura, personhood, and animacy to artificial objects can we hope to understand those objects, the media in which they appear, and the effects they have on beholders.

### Statues: Sculpture as Place

*Statue* n. L. statua, f. sta-, root of stare to stand. . . . 1. A representation in the round of a living being, sculptured, moulded, or cast in marble, metal, plaster or the like materials; esp. a figure of a deity, allegorical personage, or eminent person, usually of life-size proportions. Also transf. and similitive, as a type of silence or absence of movement or feeling. (OED)

Gormley's importance begins with his insistence on taking the human body—specifically, his own body—as his principal subject matter. This may seem so obvious as to require no notice. But it is, from the standpoint of advanced, sophisticated thinking in the art world in the twenty-first century, something like a polemical gesture. For an entire century, the most important sculpture had been more or less abstract, rendering the human body as an object to be deformed, extruded, deconstructed, fragmented, or mutilated. There is no “human” body anymore: there is the gendered body, the desiring body, the racialized body, the medical body, the sculpted body, the techno-body, the body in pain or pleasure. The human body has come to seem like an infinitely malleable assemblage of prostheses and spare parts, an expression of a “posthuman” sensibility and a “cyborg” consciousness.<sup>7</sup> The ideal form of the integral body—especially of the white,

6. I am especially concerned to avoid the kind of historicism (marked by the “post-” and the “pre-”) that reduces the history of an art or medium to two phases separated by a “rupture,” which is located in the period that just happens to correspond to the historian's field of specialization. For more on this, see “The Pictorial Turn,” in Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, especially pp. 22–23.

7. See Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Donna Haraway, “Manifesto for Cyborgs,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (Routledge, 1991).

male body—as expressed in all those familiar diagrams of Renaissance and Romantic humanism (figs. 57, 58) has seemed like an archaism or an exploded ideology to be surpassed or, even worse, a reminder of patriarchal idols and fascist monumentalism that we can do without. A casual encounter with Gormley’s work, especially with the castings of his own body for which he is best known, is likely to provoke a snap judgment that his project is retrograde, redundant, a step backward into figurative sculpture, and an outmoded humanism, masculinism, and egotism. An early admirer “didn’t dare tell anybody” how much he liked Gormley’s statues, because he “thought they were very unfashionable.”<sup>8</sup> And indeed, they were and are. How dare a contemporary sculptor, in full knowledge of a century of sculptural experimentation which from constructivism to minimalism has renounced the “statue,” simply turn back to the human body, much less *his own* body, as subject, model, and content of his art? Antony Gormley has taken this dare. The results are worth looking at and thinking about.

The first dare is the risk of what Judith Butler calls “gender trouble.” How can we “place” the sexual identity of Gormley’s statues? Gormley makes castings of his own unambiguously male body. They are sites of male identification, with phallic marks sometimes accentuated (fig. 59). Gormley also has the good (or bad) fortune to possess a rather beautiful, “sculpturesque” body that inevitably reminds a beholder of the male body as the archaic figure of the idealized, normative human form—the very image that allows us to say “man” or “mankind” when we really mean “human.” The primal scene of sculpture in the book of Genesis reinforces this sort of association: the creation of “man” as the original creative act of the divine artist, the creation of woman as a kind of surgical dismemberment of the male body. The female body is not, in the first instance, sculpted but encased inside the male, to be delivered from the male “womb” by a kind of Caesarean section. Adam is the first sculptural production; Eve, the first reproduction. Man is made, woman is born.

Gormley’s work complicates these stereotypes by activating the distinction between sex and gender at both the level of visual appearance (as in the figure with the erect penis) and in the productive processes that “engender” the sculpted object. It is a standard doctrine of feminist theory, notes Judith Butler, that “whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed. *Man* and *masculine* might just as easily

8. Quoted in Antony Gormley, *Critical Mass* (Vienna: Verein Stadtraum Remise, 1995), 7.

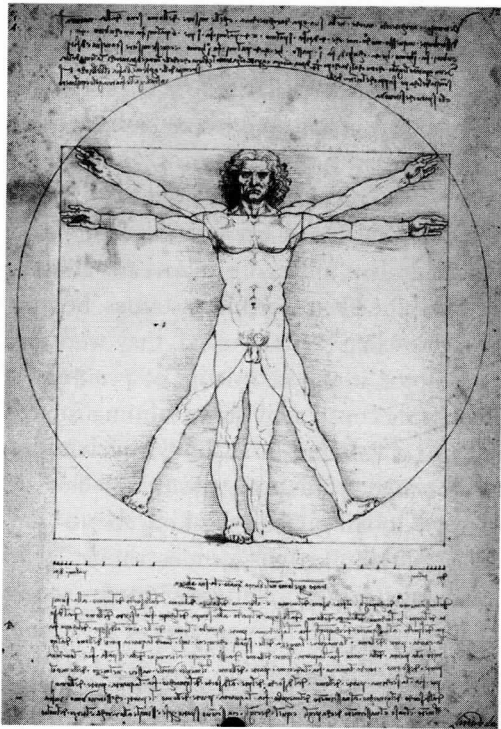


FIGURE 57  
Leonardo da Vinci, *Rule for the Proportions of the Ideal Human Figure, According to Vitruvius*.

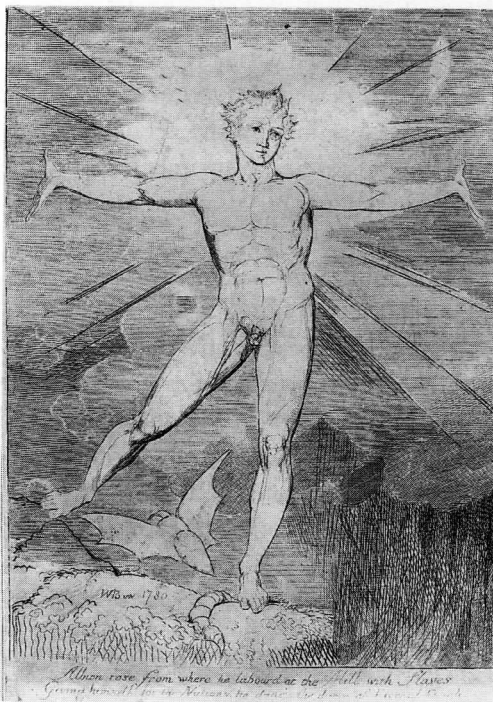


FIGURE 58  
William Blake, *The Dance of Albion (Glad Day)*, ca. 1803/1810. Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Image copyright © 2003 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



FIGURE 59 Antony Gormley, *Peer*, 1984. Courtesy of the artist.

signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.”<sup>9</sup> If Gormley’s sculpted figures are “intractably” coded as biologically male, their postures evoke the feminine codes of passivity, vulnerability, abjection, and receptivity. One might say that Gormley has a male body but uses it to express feminine (not to mention feminist) attitudes. Or that his figures express mixed messages about the relation of sex and gender, the “intractable” facts of the material, biological body and its “constructed” cultural form. More fundamentally, I think his work deconstructs (while evoking) the differences between sex and gender, nature and culture. How, after all, do we know that the penis “belongs to” the male of the species? Is the possession of a penis necessary or sufficient for “manhood” or masculinity? Once the dialectic of sex and gender has been un-

9. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 6.

leashed, as it is in Gormley's body sculptures, it is not so easily stabilized. "As a result," Butler argues, "gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive'" (67). Gormley makes visible the way the murmur of discourse is woven into the natural materiality of the human body and its sculptural traces.

An even more fundamental issue is the distinction between the gendering and *engendering* of human bodies. Real human bodies are both gendered and engendered. They are marked and re-marked by sexual difference and gender identity. But they are produced and reproduced by the interplay of bodies, even by a kind of autopoiesis in the case of cloning or parthenogenesis. What about the engendering of sculpture, the processes of its production and reproduction?

There are two traditional ways<sup>10</sup> of making sculpture: carving or molding from the outside (as in the creation of Adam), and casting from the inside out (as in the birth of Eve).<sup>11</sup> Gormley's "corpographs" work in the second mode, casting himself in a full-body life mask of plaster (fig. 60). The resulting "negative" can then be used to cast a positive image in molten metal. The shaping tool is not the hand but the artist's entire body, and it works from within matter, holding open a space within it rather than sculpting away material from outside. He produces a kind of three-dimensional photographic impression—a corpograph is the artist's preferred term—that necessarily (while the plaster is drying) catches the body in a moment of stasis. Gormley affirms and redoubles this stasis by placing his body in resolutely static positions, enduring the entombment in plaster by using Buddhist techniques of breathing and meditation. The resulting figures are steadfastly motionless. They are holding a pose, seated, crouched, supine, spread-eagled, or standing erect, suspended in meditative stillness.

10. I put to the side for the moment a "third way" that works by assembly and construction.

11. If we locate the Adam and Eve analogy at the intersection of gender and engendering, we would have to say that while Adam is the first man from the standpoint of gender, he is also mother of Eve from the standpoint of engendering. These ambiguities of gender and reproduction are made marvelously complex in films like the *Alien* trilogy, which render the alien as an egg-laying dragon queen who implants her hatchlings to "gestate" in the bodies of men and women; or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, in which zombielike "pod people" are engendered by a process of vegetative transfer of vital fluids through vines and tendrils. See Klaus Theweleit on the uncanny resemblance between some of Gormley's sculpture and the deadly pods in *Gormley Theweleit* (Schleswig: Holsteinschen Kunstverein, 1997), 59, 113.



FIGURE 60

Work in progress, 1986.  
 Antony Gormley and  
 his wife, Vicki, with  
 parts of plaster cast. Still  
 from the channel 4 tele-  
 vision series *State of  
 the Art*, 1987. © Geoff  
 Dunlop/Illuminations.

Like the minimalist objects which are among their sculptural ancestors, they refuse all gesture or narrative syntax, forcing the spectator's attention back onto a specific object, this body, understood as a place, a space where someone has lived.<sup>12</sup>

This procedure is so simple and obvious that it seems a wonder that no one had ever quite thought of doing it before. Casting the whole body as a

12. One reason the tradition of assembled or constructed sculpture (David Smith, Anthony Caro, cubist and surrealist sculpture) seems antithetical to Gormley's practice is that it almost inevitably produces a sense of gesture and syntax in the figure, making it a body that *acts* in space rather than simply "being there," which is, I take it, Gormley's aim, and one of

life (or death) mask, the self-portrait, the monumentalizing of the human form in the static, standing figure—literally, the statue—all these resources had been available to sculpture, but never combined in quite this way. Why not? Perhaps because the results are visually subtle, even misleading: the casual observer may not know that these are casts of the artist's body, and take them simply as generic figurative representations that seem "old-fashioned" in their archaism and simplicity. Perhaps also because sophisticated viewers dismiss the product for presenting the "wrong look," no matter how original the process might be. This may be why Gormley often seems to be in the position of denying what seems like a self-evident appearance of his work. He claims that he "was never really interested in figurative sculpture per se"<sup>13</sup> or even in "representation" or copying more generally. My own view is that his work is thoroughly mimetic and representational, but not of the human body as a narrative agent or actor; instead, the body is portrayed as a purely contemplative figure of witnessing and enduring in poses of suspended animation. Gormley subjects the processes of sculptural representation to a critical reshaping, so that the apparently familiar, recognizable results (life-size anthropomorphic statues, most notably) radiate a strange sense of inward animation and sentient presence that is the abiding goal of (and phobia about) sculpture. Gormley's figurative statues are "uncanny" in Freud's sense of the word. That is, they are not visibly weird or grotesque but "strangely familiar," both masculine and feminine, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, homely and homeless. We have always known sculpture could do and has been doing this. Why did it wait till this moment to make its appearance?

There is a systematic doubleness, a perceptual double-take, then, that accompanies the experience of Gormley's statues. They are what Walter Benjamin called "dialectical images," deeply ambiguous figures that fuse contrary forms of affect and interpretation, risking misapprehension so thoroughly that the artist may even seem to be "in denial" about what is most manifest and obvious about them. There is nothing wrong with this. Artists' intentions never fully determine the meaning of a work, any more than critical interpretations do. If they did, we could dispense with the

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the features of his work that most firmly links him to minimalism. One thinks here of Robert Morris's "I-Box," depicting the naked body of the artist in a sculpted metal box with the letter *I* as a door.

13. Gormley, *Critical Mass*, 164.

work and just listen to what the artist has to say. Interviews could take the place of sculpture.

But Gormley is quite aware that his own work is no mere communication of messages he might want to send. He stresses, in fact, that the process involves a necessary descent into blindness and unknowing. Unlike a sculptor who steps back and looks at his work from outside as he carves it from stone, Gormley immerses himself in the material, encases himself, buries himself alive. He only sees what he has produced after the fact, at which point he has the option of going on with it, casting it further, or casting it aside.

What Gormley shows us, then, is that the body is a place, and that sculpture reveals the shape of that place, the invisible interior space where someone lives or has lived. That place is represented as a positive form, a "statue" that has to be seen as embodied darkness (hence, I think, the frequent use of lead as material).<sup>14</sup> The place of the body is also indicated as an absence, a negative impression or void, as in *Bed* (fig. 61), or the implied interior of an architectural or biomorphic "case," as in *Sense*, *Flesh*, or *Fruit*. In these latter "cases," the sculptural object may remind us of a tomb or a womb, a casket or a seed pod in which the body is gestating. In either case, there is a sense of an impassive, almost featureless exterior hiding an explosive interior, much like the structure of a bomb.<sup>15</sup>

Inert or explosive objects, dead or living things, industrial relics or paleontological fossils, individual or generic bodies, gendered or engendered identities, persons or places, archaic or contemporary works of art: the strange power of what I have called Gormley's "statues" resides in the irresolvable tensions they activate among these alternative ways of "seeing as." But this is still only half (at most) of the story. Sculpture wants to be a place, wants to offer us a space for thought and feeling. It provides this place out of its own lack, its abject status or "place" in the hierarchy of the arts as the medium of brute materiality—iron, lead, cement, mud—or (conversely) in its impression of serene detachment in a meditative space beyond desire. But sculpture also wants a place to be, a location or station or site where it can be seen, encountered by other bodies. At this point all the dialectics of

14. I'm reminded here of Marc Quinn's *Self* (1991), a sculptural self-portrait carved in the frozen blood of the artist, shown at the Sensation exhibition at the Royal Academy and the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

15. "The perfect form of sculpture is a bomb," Gormley notes in *Critical Mass*, 162. Cf. my discussion of Robert Morris's "Bomb Sculpture Proposal" in *Picture Theory*.



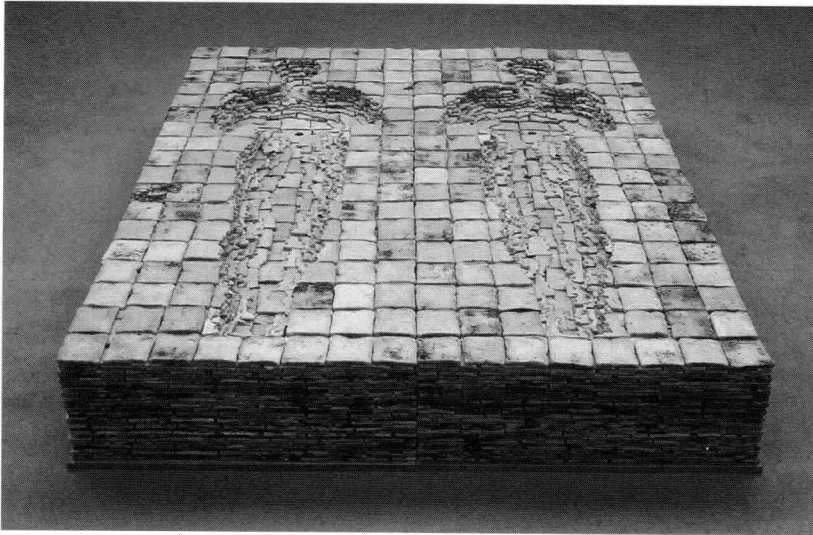


FIGURE 61 Antony Gormley, *Bed*, 1981. Bread and wax sculpture. Courtesy of the artist.

inner and outer form that have been activated in the shaping of a sculptural object are redoubled in the act of its placement in a setting or landscape. The statue has to find a place to stand. This longing for a place is as crucial to what sculpture wants as the desire that haunts the object itself.

## Sites: Place as Sculpture

### ANECDOTE OF THE JAR

*I placed a jar in Tennessee  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.*

*The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a port in air.  
It took dominion everywhere.*

*The jar was gray and bare.  
It did not give of bird or bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee.*

WALLACE STEVENS<sup>16</sup>

If Gormley's sculpted objects are best seen as sites, they are also what Robert Smithson called "non-sites," or displaced places. Like many artists of the sixties, Smithson sought a way of moving out of the space of the gallery into other places—the "wilderness" of the American West, the postindustrial wastelands of New Jersey. He brought back from these places material samples, geological maps, and photographic documentation which reconstituted the gallery or space of exhibition as a non-site, a place defined by its reference to another place. Gormley does something similar, only in reverse. His corpographs are already non-sites in themselves, three-dimensional photographs that refer to the absent space of a body. These non-sites are then transported to a wide variety of places, some traditional locations for sculpture (plazas, squares, architectural settings, museums, galleries) and others in natural settings, most notably the magnificent blankness and expansiveness of the Australian Desert and the tidal mudflats of Cuxhaven, Germany.

Wallace Stevens gives us a sense of the impact of the singular artifact on a place. The lone figure, especially one stationed as a witness or monitory presence, changes the whole sense of a place. As Heidegger suggested, the sculpted object "institutes" the place as a human location, a site of gathering, rather than a mere location. The eloquence and power of the figure seems, moreover, inversely proportional to its dramatic or gestural insistence. It is as if the more passive, noncommittal, and self-absorbed the figure, the more "dominion" it exerts over the space around it.<sup>17</sup> Another way to see this is to ponder the scale of the human figure against the vastness of space. *Another Place* (fig. 62), which places Gormley's figures on the tidal flats of Cuxhaven, clearly evokes the pictorial precedent of Caspar

16. From *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 76.

17. I'm reminded here of the contrast between Bob Dylan's and Bruce Springsteen's ways of relating to an audience. Springsteen is a constant whirlwind of energy, passion, and insistence, reaching out directly to the audience. Dylan (far more effectively, in my view) almost seems indifferent to the presence of the audience, focused on some incommunicable relation to his own words and music. Perhaps this is what Michael Fried's categories of "absorption" and "theatricality" really come down to.

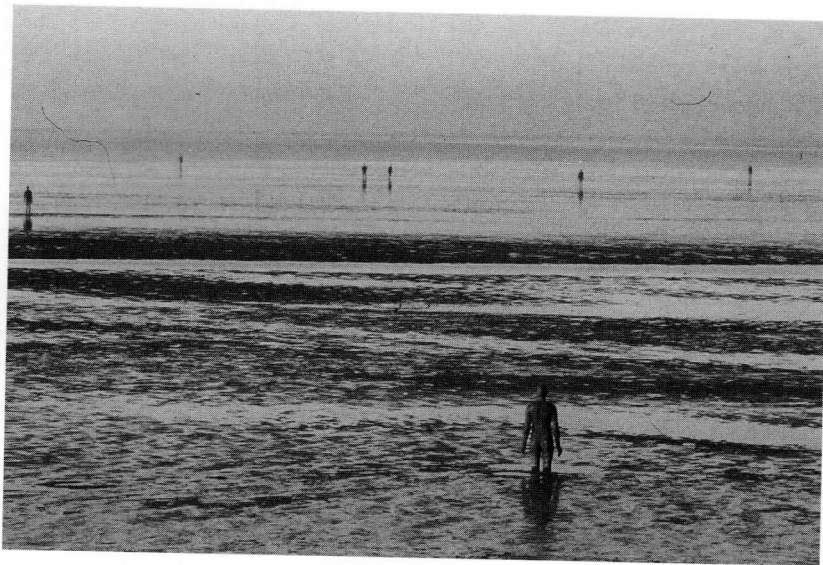


FIGURE 62 Antony Gormley, *Another Place*, 1997; installation over 3 sq. km, Cuxhaven, Germany. Photograph © Helmut Kunde. Courtesy of the artist.

David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*. The tiny figure of the monk against the vastness of the beach, sea, and sky may seem at first to declare the insignificance of the figure. But a blink of the eye (or a moment's thought) reverses this impression, turning the landscape into what Gaston Bachelard called an "intimate immensity."<sup>18</sup> The landscape becomes an inscape, an interior space all the more evocative for its blankness.<sup>19</sup>

*Another Place* is notable, moreover, for the way it complicates the Romantic image of the lone, singular figure contemplating the vast, sublime landscape. In this work, Gormley multiplies the figures (as many as a dozen of them may be seen in a single panoramic photograph), dispersing them at intervals of several hundred yards, all facing out to sea. The effect is of a stately procession into oblivion, as if a platoon of sentinels were pausing on their death march for a final look. The advancing and receding tide must enhance this sense that as the sea rises and falls, the figures are descending

18. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958; Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), chap. 8.

19. See Stephen Bann's evocation of Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* in "The Raising of Lazarus," in *Antony Gormley* (Malmo-Liverpool-Dublin, 1993), 71.

into or emerging from the sea. Figure and ground each "give away" their motion and stillness to the other.

So while the image of the sculpted figure that, like Stevens's Jar or Friedrich's *Monk*, "[takes] dominion everywhere," dominating and organizing the wilderness, is evoked by Gormley's emplacements, it is not quite what they are after. The effect, I think, is more dialectical and interactive, a mutual dislocation. This is most evident, perhaps, in Gormley's gallery installations, which sometimes recall Robert Morris's technique of reorienting a single minimal object in a variety of positions within the exhibition space, so that a horizontal "slab" becomes a vertical monolith, which in turn becomes a "cloud" suspended from the ceiling (figs. 63, 64).

Although Gormley's work has always been highly sensitive to issues of placement, it does seem as if his site installations in the last decade have been increasingly concerned with addressing the problem of the isolated and monumentalized singular figure. This concern is expressed, I think, in several ways: by a multiplication of figures; by an increasing tendency to breach the boundaries of the integral body; by an enhancement of the sense of "alienness" and homelessness surrounding the figures, an expression of longing for place that remains rigorously and on principle unsatisfied by any particular location. This last effect is perhaps most noticeable in the "street" installations (fig. 65) that station Gormley's figures as if they were vagrants peering into shop windows, or drunks sleeping off the night's excess in the lee of a building. The photographs of interactions of passersby with these figures are most telling; they suggest a kind of intimacy and familiarity coupled with strangeness and dislocation. In contrast with the assertively central placement of the typical public monument (which is, as a consequence, usually ignored), Gormley's "marginal" placements of figures where we would least expect them have the effect of producing a double take, not unlike the shock one sometimes feels on encountering some George Segal figures in a park, or a hyper-realist Bruce Naumann figure or installation. The difference is that Segal depends on gestures of action, and Naumann on a *trompe-l'oeil* effect, a literal shock at taking something as alive that turns out to be a simulacrum. With Gormley, there is no simulation of the visual appearance of life. They assert their status as statues, affirming the muteness and stillness of sculpture. If his figures "simulate" anything like life, it is a transitional zone of sentience between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Gormley's most dramatic departure from the almost solipsistic focus on

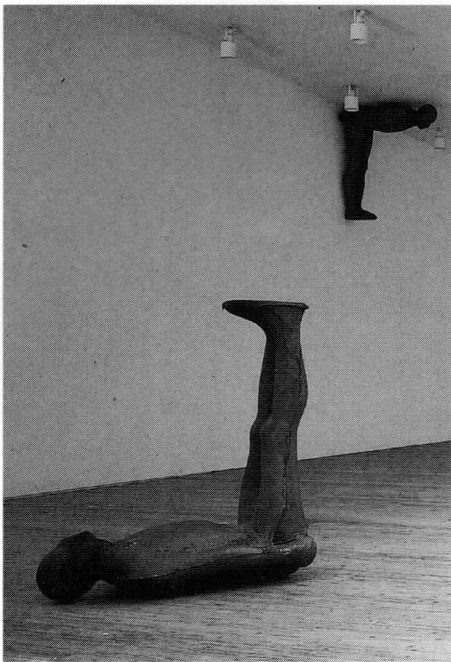
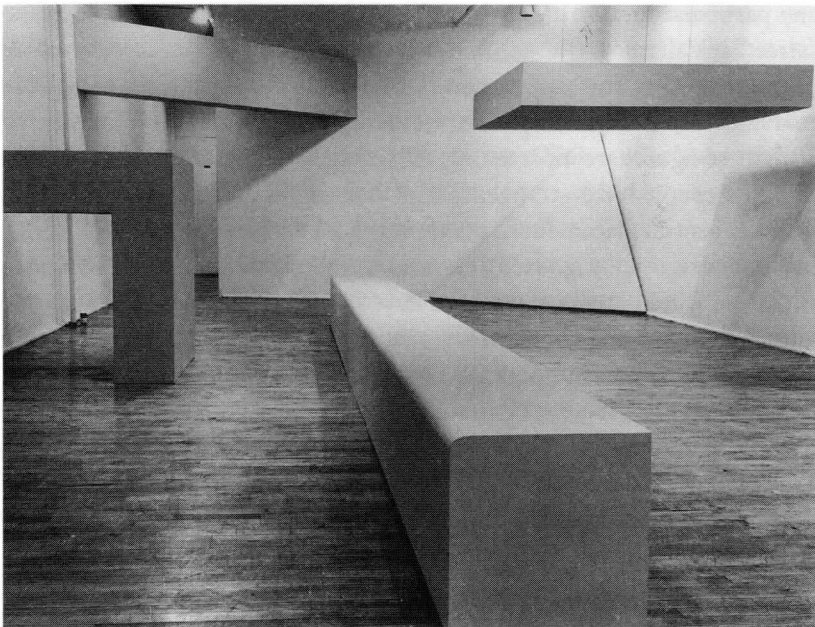


FIGURE 63  
Antony Gormley, *Testing a World View*,  
1993. Courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 64  
Robert Morris, Green Gallery installa-  
tion, 1964. Courtesy of the artist.



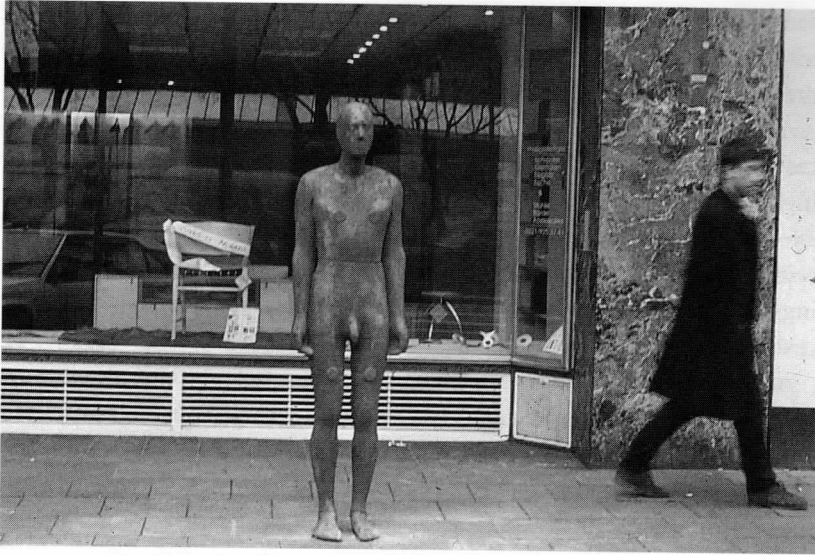


FIGURE 65 Antony Gormley, *Total Strangers*, 1999. Courtesy of the artist.

his own figure isolated in a space has been the series of works known as *Field for the British Isles*, realized in Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia (plate 14). This project constitutes a dialectical inversion of emphasis in several respects. First, it almost completely eliminates the sculptor's own hands or body in favor of a collective process that produces not just a multiple set of figures but a massive crowd of figures, so closely packed into the space of exhibition that they occupy every inch of floor space and leave no room for a spectator to enter. (If Gormley had been an abstract painter, one might be tempted to see a reference to "all-over" and "color-field" composition, an effect enhanced by the untouchable framing of this collective object in the space of exhibition. This is not a piece that can move outdoors.) Second, the figures are tiny, precisely the size that makes them potentially handheld objects and reflects their insistently manual production. Third, the figures are molded, not cast. Fourth, the relation of figure and ground, the sculptural body and the place it activates, is completely collapsed in *Field*: the figure is quite literally the ground, and vice versa. And fifth, in contrast with the internal, meditative absorption signaled by the closed or blank eyes of most of Gormley's figures, the tiny Golem-like terra-cotta figures all have dark eye sockets, which collectively

form the impression of a mass of beseeching faces, all gazing at the spectator. If sculpture really “wants” something, *Field* is a work that gives full expression to that desire while rigorously withholding the answer.

This “withholding” (a link with the mysterious inwardness of Gormley’s cast sculptographs) casts the desire for an answer onto the spectator, tempting us into narratives that can account for the disconcerting and fascinating effect of this image of mass spectatorship. With its waves of varying earth/skin tones, *Field* recalls, first, Vasari’s primal scene of sculpture, the shaping of a “lump of clay” into a man—not, however, into a singular male ancestor, an “Adam,” but an infinitely differentiated collectivity united by proximity and similitude. The signs of gender differentiation are completely eliminated in the engendering of these figures. We are left only with what Emmanuel Levinas called the naked, unconditional appeal of the human face, an appeal that transcends sexual difference, and perhaps even species difference, since the faces of some animals (especially our mammalian cousins) seem to present a similar claim on our attention.

No single story is capable of stabilizing this work and rendering its desire nameable. *Field* evokes a whole range of precedents in minimalist sculpture, recalling a variety of earthworks and non-sites, especially Walter de Maria’s “earth rooms,” and the emphasis on seriality, the body, and space.<sup>20</sup> It has been read as a host of lost (or saved?) souls assembling for the Last Judgment; as the spirits of unborn fetuses yearning for incarnation; as the resurrected victims of the Holocaust demanding justice; as a parable of the specific sites from which these figures emerge as a local “earthwork”; or as a global allegory of displacement and diaspora, as if the “huddled masses” of immigrants, exiles, homeless, and refugees were all assembled in a single space. Each of these interpretive frameworks casts the spectator in a different role as well, inviting us to bask in the glow of mass attention or recoil from the sense of accusation and impossible demand. The “double takes” elicited by Gormley’s singular figures are vastly multiplied with this work and have an effect (which art critic Johann Winckelmann observed in the highest achievements of classical sculpture) of fascination and astonishment—quite literally, a momentary turning of the spectator into something like a statue, stunned into contemplative stillness.

The notion of “collective representation,” the condensation of a social

20. Cf. Gormley’s *Host*, a room flooded with mud in the old City Hall Jail, Charleston, South Carolina.

totality into a single gestalt, is central to what Émile Durkheim called “totemism.”<sup>21</sup> The totem is, literally (in its origin in the Ojibway language), “a relative of mine,” a figure that mediates social difference (exogamous sexual relations, tribal distinctions) with a sense of social solidarity and collective identity.<sup>22</sup> (William Blake’s figure of the giant Albion, who contains the whole universe in his body, is an important English precedent.) Gormley’s rendering of the “body of the multitude” (a “host” in another sense) is another of his forays into the most archaic sculptural traditions.<sup>23</sup> This figure receives its most ominous (early) modern rendering in the frontispiece of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, where the social totality is “personated” and embodied in the figure of a giant man, the sovereign who contains a multitude inside his body (fig. 66). Hobbes’s collective figure, like Gormley’s, seems to rise out of the earth; but *Field* has no unitary, integral, sovereign shape—except, of course, for the one that is given to it by the beholder. The spectator’s body plays the role of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, insofar as the spectator frames the mass assembly in some subjective gestalt (a narrative or way of “seeing as”). The closest Gormley comes, I think, to flirting with the totalitarian overtones of *Leviathan* as collective giant is his *Brick Man* (fig. 67), which resonates both with the signs of collectivity (the bricks as the individuals in the social body) and the aura of the monolithic idol. As it happens, the brick makers, from Istock Building Products, supplied the prepared clay used in *Field for the British Isles* and fired the figures in their kilns.

If *Field* marked Gormley’s “moving out” from his own body to that of others, and from art spaces into a more public sphere, it also heralded a certain popularity and populism that comes with the territory of sculpture that looks figurative and “humanistic.” *Field* was an unqualified popular success, drawing “a passionate response from people who saw it in Liverpool and Dublin,” according to art critic Lewis Biggs.<sup>24</sup> The combination of

21. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912], trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995). For a discussion of some of the genealogies of the concept of totemism in its relations to idolatry and fetishism, see chapters 7–9 above.

22. For more on totemism, see section 2 above.

23. Comparisons have been drawn with the terra-cotta army of Xian, China; the thousand bodhisattvas in Kyoto, Japan; and (in a contemporary context) with the mass-produced “surrogates” of Allan McCollum and the “ranks of humanoid shells” of Magdalena Abakanovics. See Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leith, “A Place Where Thought Might Grow,” in *Antony Gormley: Field for the British Isles* (Llandudno, Wales: Oriol Mostyn, 1994), 24–26.

24. Lewis Biggs, introduction to *Antony Gormley: Field for the British Isles*.





FIGURE 66 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* frontispiece, detail. Photograph courtesy of Department of Special Collections, The Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago. Reprinted with permission of the University of Chicago Library.

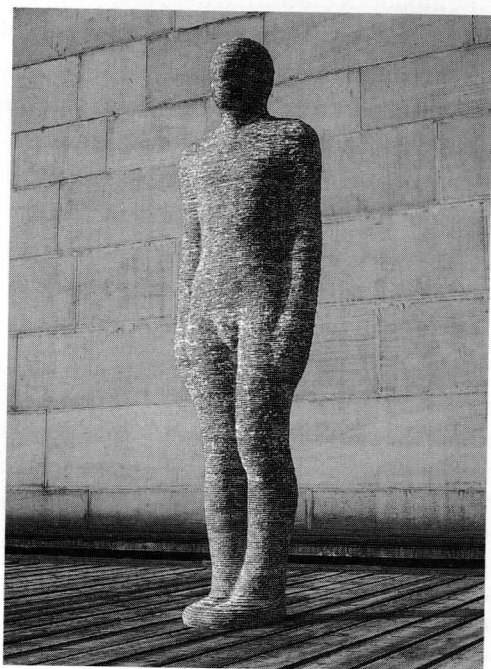


FIGURE 67  
Antony Gormley, *Brick Man*, 1987.  
Courtesy of the artist.

collective, local authorship-involvement and the sheer visual power of the work, its rather demotic accessibility to many kinds of beholders and interpretations, make *Field* into one of the most successful public art projects of its time. This can be a mixed blessing, of course. There is nothing like popularity and public approval to earn the scorn of an art world elite that thinks no serious artist can make serious work for the masses. But *Field* is not only for but in a certain sense *of* and *by* the masses, asserting the democracy of artistic imagination and the possibility that the sculptural "genius of the place" might be formed by its own inhabitants. Gormley serves, in that case, more like a *Gastarbeiter* than a visiting "art star," a guest worker who assists in the process of instituting a place.

His most recent large public works, *Angel of the North* (fig. 68) and *Quantum Cloud* (fig. 69), continue this process of what we Americans call "outreach" beyond the boundaries of the cast body and the conventional spaces of artistic exhibition. *Angel* literally spreads its wings in the highly traditional gesture of welcoming and opening, combining what are by now the familiar polarities of Gormley's work. The angel opens its wings for flight, yet it stands firmly anchored to resist winds of up to 100 miles per hour. It combines an archaic rendering of the human form with the modern, technical prostheses of airplane wings. It expresses both the earth-bound, gravitational pull of sculpture and its transcendental, aerial, utopian idealism. Of all Gormley's public works it is the one that has sparked the most violent controversy, a target for the usual battles over the waste of public money on the arts. Vilified for its size (63 feet high, 169-foot wingspan, 100 tons of reinforced steel), its monumentality (some critics associated it with Albert Speer and fascist monuments), its expense, its danger as a distraction to the 90,000 motorists who pass it every day on the A-1, its propensity for attracting lightning, and even a pornographic image (one critic saw in it a flasher opening his trench coat), *Angel* has nonetheless rapidly achieved acceptance and a landmark status of sorts. Other works of public art seem destined to undergo this ritual of humiliation and sanctification. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial is perhaps the most notable and moving example of this transformation from reviled to revered monument. Already it seems that the question about *Angel* is not, what does it mean? but, how did it become a totem of this place? Beyond the obvious resonance with the spread-eagled figure of the thunderbird often found on Native American totem poles, the Angel resonates somehow with its abandoned, postindustrial, wasteland site, thereby helping to institute and resurrect it as place.



FIGURE 68  
Antony Gormley, *Angel of the North*, 1998. Courtesy of the artist.

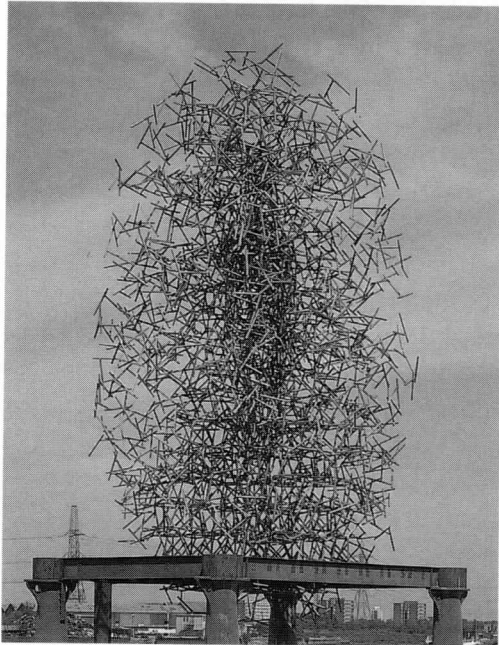


FIGURE 69  
Antony Gormley, *Quantum Cloud*, 1999. Courtesy of the artist.

What will be the fate of *Quantum Cloud*, Gormley's latest project? The site and scale will put it in competition with Nelson's column, Westminster Bridge, Big Ben, and other London landmarks. Will this be taken as an image of the digitized, cybernetic body, abstracted into a cloud of "quanta" or bits of materialized information? Will it be taken as a figure of what critic Tom Nairn called "the break-up of Britain"<sup>25</sup>—Albion deconstructed? If it is like Gormley's other public pieces, it will both invite and frustrate allegories of this kind, serving as a demotic invitation to enter a place for contemplation in the heart of urban commotion. As a continuation of Gormley's effort to "think with materials" and with the sculpted body, it surely expresses his current tendency to move beyond his own body. The visual impression, in fact, is that of the body breaking up and dispersing in a cloud of steel segments (one could also read this, of course, as an image of convergence, as if the segments were like giant iron filings coalescing around the magnetic field left by an absent, almost invisible body). Once again, the body is a place, but this time a place whose boundaries are indeterminate, exploding or imploding, expanding or contracting. Perhaps that perfect shape for sculpture, the bomb, has "gone off" in this work.

If I believed in linear, progressive narratives of artistic careers, I might conclude that *Quantum Cloud* signals the end of Gormley's entrapment in his own body, and the beginning of a new phase in which the body, the human figure, and the traditional sculptural choices of casting and carving have been replaced by or refunctioned as construction and assembly. The welded totems of David Smith and the entire constructivist tradition in sculpture might be hovering about this cluster of I-beams. But I don't believe in these sorts of narratives. Gormley has already been "out of his body" for over a decade, and construction has always been an important feature of his work. More important, the story to be told about his work is not so much a matter of what he wants, but what sculpture seems to want from him. The general answer seems clear: Gormley's sculpture wants a place to be and to be a place. Where and in what form this desire will be gratified remains to be seen.

25. Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: New Left Books, 1977).