

EXHIBITION REVIEW: Antony Gormley's Domain Field at Baltic, Gateshead, UK

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Figurative sculpture has been taking a bit of a battering in recent years. Here I am thinking less in terms of critical appraisal than of the actual acts of iconoclasm perpetrated upon countless monuments erected within the public arena. Whilst iconoclasm itself has a long, even a noble history, the latest spate of such interventions might be dated to the fall of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This epoch changing moment was all too commonly accompanied by episodes of iconoclastic fervour as public monuments dedicated to now out-of-favour political figures were variously vandalised, removed, relocated and even destroyed. Similar events have taken place closer to home. For example, in the 1990s the memorial statue of Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, newly erected outside St Clement Danes Church in the Strand, London, was targeted and attacked by protestors. A similar fate awaited Ivor Roberts-Jones' famous monument to Winston Churchill during the May Day anti-capitalism protest in 2000. In the end both monuments survived, escaping with little more than surface paint damage – and, in the case of the Churchill monument, the ignominy of being given a 'mohican' made from the grass ripped up in Parliament Square. Iconoclasm has also played a significant role in recent Middle Eastern politics. In

Afghanistan the destruction of the famous fifth century Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taleban regime in 2001 generated worldwide condemnation, while more recent events in war-torn Iraq have seen the toppling of countless monuments to Saddam Hussein.

Whilst the wholesale destruction of important historical and cultural artefacts is generally to be deplored it is easy to understand the political motivation behind such acts which raise complex questions about the nature of public monuments. Moreover, the very fact that such cultural objects continue to generate such heated reactions is a testament to the continuing socio-political significance of art in the public arena.

It should be noted, however, that not all acts of 'iconoclasm' seek to destroy monuments. For example, in 1998 a small group of local people set out at 6am on a Sunday morning to 'modify' one of the most controversial public monuments erected in their locale, Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North*. As has been popularly reported, their actions did not involve damaging the work. On the contrary they sought to 'enhance' its significance for the local population by clothing the *Angel* in a huge scale Newcastle United football jersey adorned with the number 9 and name of local soccer hero Alan Shearer. This symbolic gesture operated as far more than a light-hearted prank. In essence it served to



Figure 1 Antony Gormley, *Allotment II*, 1996, reinforced concrete. © the artist. (Photo courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube)

mark the definitive acceptance of the *Angel of the North* by the community, thus confounding the predictions of many cultural critics that such a 'modern' work would be incomprehensible to the local population and rejected out of hand. On the contrary, the *Angel of the North* has largely been embraced by the Newcastle and Gateshead population and has since become an icon for the north-east.

Gormley's status as artist of the people, and as a figurative sculptor working in an era in which figuration is still viewed by many as suspect, has subsequently gone from strength to strength. It is, therefore, appropriate that the most extensive presentation of Gormley's work to be held in Britain to date was recently staged at Baltic in Gateshead, just four miles from the site of his most infamous work. The Baltic exhibition, entitled simply *Antony Gormley*, occupied the entrance space and three of the main galleries within the recently renovated, former Hovis flour mill situated on the River Tyne. All the works displayed were produced in the last decade and included the *Expansion* pieces *Fruit*, *Body and Earth*, 1993 and *Allotment II*, 1996 (figure 1), an installation

originally commissioned for the Malmö Konsthall. There can be little doubt, however, that most attention was focused upon *Domain Field* a new work specially commissioned for the exhibition and which occupied the entire Level Four gallery (figure 2). *Domain Field* is an installation of more than 250 individual figurative sculptures each constructed from slender, stainless steel bars of random lengths welded together at random angles. As in Gormley's recent *Quantum Cloud* series, these figures form a matrix that alludes to the form of the human body while never actually replicating its exterior boundaries.

Viewed individually, each figure seems simultaneously solid and transparent, grounded and weightless. However, it is when seen as a mass, a crowd of spiky, thorny and shimmering steel figures permeated by light and air that the installation comes to life. Viewed from above the effect is disorienting, as if one is looking down at an empty room that is gradually metamorphosing into a crowded public square. Viewed from eye level, within the crowd of figures itself, it as if one is in the midst of an explosion of material fragments which coalesce to form human bodies. Each component within the work is like a Giacometti sculpture at the precise moment when the central mass has exploded outwards and been frozen in suspended animation.

Domain Field essentially brings together many of the ideas explored in Gormley's more recent works. The individual figurative forms that constitute the whole are the products of casting from the human body. However, Gormley has here departed from his usual dependence upon his own body, the source for such works as *Sound II* and the *Angel of the North*. Rather *Domain Field* is made up of bodies cast from local volunteers



aged from two to 85 years old, each of whom submitted to the arduous process of casting that Gormley usually reserves for himself. Thus each volunteer was, in turn, smeared with Vaseline, wrapped in cling film and covered with hessian and plaster. Once the plaster had dried the now rigidly encasing shell was cut open and passed on to a welder who constructed the figure within the void left by the casting process. It is also significant that this process did not take place in the seclusion of an artist's studio. Rather, both casting and welding were executed within the same space in which the final work was to be exhibited. The public were also able to watch the whole process from a spectator's gallery in the weeks preceding the opening of the show. In this way, Baltic's exhibition space became both studio and factory, fulfilling the aspirations of recently departed director Sune Nordgren to make the Baltic a space in which art is not only viewed but also made. However, it should not be overlooked that the reference to factory production also has a strong resonance for the local region. Shipbuilding, though much in decline since the Thatcher era, is still a key aspect of industry in the north-east. Indeed the views from my hotel window over the Swan Hunter shipyard, watching welders at work on the giant skeletal frame of a new vessel, provided a more than useful analogue to Baltic's *Domain Field* commission.

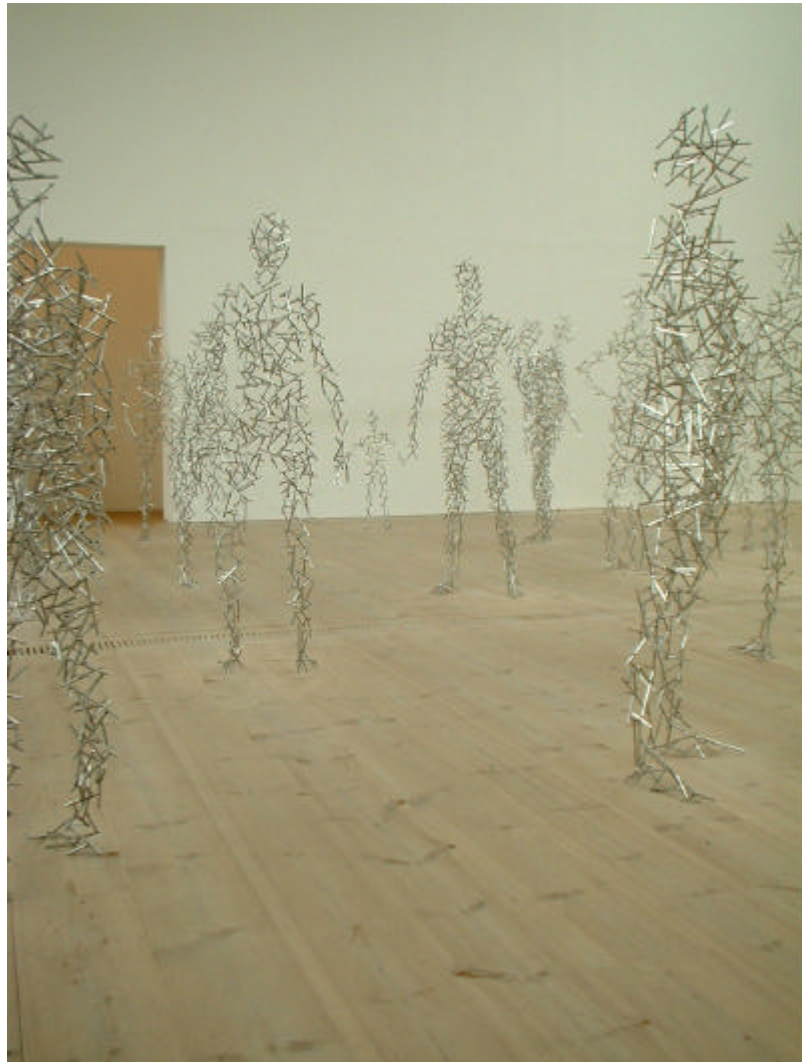


Figure 2 Antony Gormley, *Domain Field*, BALTIC 2003, stainless steel. © the artist

The process of making *Domain Field* was clearly as much a part of the work as the finished product and, as Gormley himself has claimed, represents 'community art in the truest sense'. The sculptor's decision to cast local volunteers rather than his own body could be construed as marking something of a departure. 'It's a big shift in my work', Gormley has stated, 'from using my own body as an example of the human condition to trying to collaborate with people – creating a collective body, if you like, to represent the community'. However, this is clearly not the first time that notions of collectivity have been articulated within Gormley's work. In

Allotment II, for example, displayed at Baltic on the floor below *Domain Field*, Gormley took a range of 15 specific measurements from 300 volunteers in Malmö in Sweden. These measurements were then deployed to generate a series of cuboid, concrete bunker-like forms, with each retaining its unique scale and proportion but lacking other individualising features. Arranged on a grid pattern reminiscent of a modern cityscape, *Allotment II* evokes the potential coldness and inhumanity of urban spaces and communities. A somewhat different sense of community is also central to the sculptor's several *Field* pieces in which local groups participated in the moulding of tens of thousands of simply formed clay figures, subsequently placed, cheek by jowl, to fill the entire floor area of an exhibition space. The startling effect of these installations, whether displayed in familiar exhibition venues or in more dramatic settings (such as *Field for the British Isles*, installed in St Mary's Church, Shrewsbury in 2001 <http://www.fieldshrewsbury.com>), is highly disorienting and inverts the conventional spectatorial experience. Rather than entering a space to view art, the spectator is excluded from the space by the sheer density of figures all of which stare in an anxious and destabilising manner, reconstituting the viewer as the subject of the work.

Domain Field both draws upon, and departs from, these earlier projects. For example, all three works strive to explore and articulate the tensions inherent within the dual notion of individuality and communality. Thus each work highlights the simultaneous status of the figures within the works as unique beings and components within a collective body. Individualising features are pared down to a bare minimum reducing, or even eliminating, the ability to distinguish race, gender, social status or conventional notions of physical beauty. Yet, this process never reduces the figures simply to components. Each retains his or her own unique scale and form. Here it seems that Gormley is

exploring the very boundaries of being, the spaces at the edge of individuality. *Domain Field*, it seems to me, takes the next step in this investigation. Whereas the figures within *Allotment II* and *Field* retain their exterior physical forms, their outer shells, those in *Domain Field* lose this entirely. This sense is perhaps best experienced by quite literally entering the work. As the spectator walks among the maze formed by what Gormley describes as 'a sparkling myriad of stainless steel elements', the bodies themselves seem insubstantial. One is conscious, at first, of the fragility of the piece as each individual figure gently, almost indiscernibly, oscillates and vibrates in response to the presence of the viewer. A heavy sneeze, one suspects, and the whole crowd could come tumbling down. Despite this impression, however, it soon becomes apparent that the figures stand far more solidly, more foursquare, than this initial impression might give. On the day I visited the show, an army of young schoolchildren was let loose amongst the figures by clearly anxious teachers issuing dire warnings of the consequences of running or, more especially, touching the works. Despite such strictures, several of the children seemed incapable of controlling their energies. The evident excitement at being amidst what must have seemed to them like a physical incarnation of a magical scene from the latest Harry Potter novel resulted in several of the figures being knocked. The effect was truly wonderful. Each knocked figure was abruptly animated into a new existence in time and space, furthering the metamorphic effect of the whole.

Perhaps more than any other of Gormley's works, *Domain Field* explores the dichotomy between material and spiritual existence. Each figure alludes to the physicality of the human form yet undermines our sense of its actual physical structure through its denial of bone, muscle and exterior skin. In one sense, the emphasis on line within the construction of the figures alludes to drawing, indeed Gormley has called the *Domain*



Field works 'a kind of drawing in space'. However, these 'drawn' bodies refuse to be contained by line. As Darian Leader claims in an essay published in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, these works appeal 'to a rather different notion of embodiment, less the classical Western bounded and enclosed figure, than the Eastern idea of the body as involving a set of relations with the surrounding world'.

Gormley's *Domain Field* invites speculation on the very nature of being. The

experience of being amongst the crowd of figures – a part of the collective body – and simultaneously a disparate entity within it, serves to destabilise our conventional expectations of both sculpture and the body itself. Ultimately, *Domain Field* manages successfully to question and re-articulate the role of figurative sculpture for the twenty-first century.

The Antony Gormley retrospective was on show at Baltic in Gateshead UK from 17 May – 25 August 2003.