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## The body as architecture

**Antony Gormley: Blind Light, the Hayward Gallery, London, England. May 17 - August 19, 2007**

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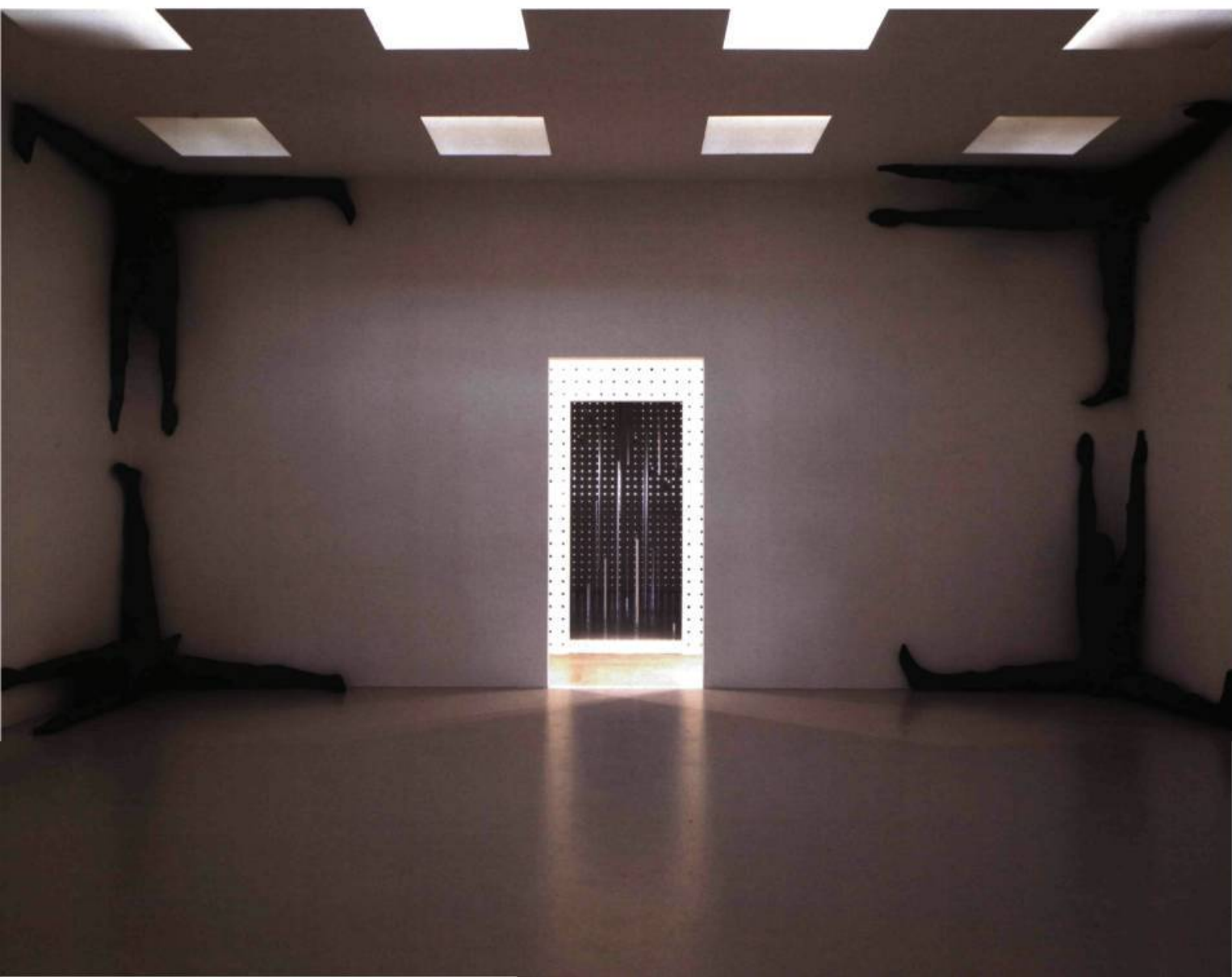
## THE BODY AS ARCHITECTURE

Antony Gormley: *Blind Light*, the Hayward Gallery, London, England. May 17 – August 19, 2007

long awaited major London showing of Antony Gormley's sculpture and installation, the first in 25 years, *Blind Light* presents some challenging new work by one of Britain's most celebrated and popular contemporary artists. In Canada, Gormley's sculpture has earlier been seen at the *British Now!* show held at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in 1988 and curated by Sandra Grant-Marchand, then the widely celebrated solo show *Field* held at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, in 1993, curated by Louise Déry. *Field* travelled in various versions to venues in Europe and Asia, as well as the United States. Later on, Antony Gormley shifted scale from his body-based scale to the enormous *The Angel of the North* (1995) and opinion began to vary on his approach. Some criticized the bombastic, overblown scale of this outdoor figure. It felt almost Catholic in its domineering, albeit beatific conception and execution. *Another Place* with its figures standing at various locations on Crosby Beach on the Mersey Estuary near Liverpool was decidedly more popular, though surfers were irritated that one of their favourite surf spots had been taken over by art. One or two old timers even called the lifeguard service believing these figures at high tide up

to their necks or under water, were real people. More recently Gormley did the contrary, building a sculpture out of garbage, a detritus man called *Waste Man* (2006). There was a ritual burning that followed at the seaside resort of Margate, and waste man, and all the tables, chairs, bits and pieces he was made of were converted to ashes. While the construction of the piece took a month and a half, it was completely dissolved, sacrificed into ashes in less than 32 minutes.

As an invitation to the show, 30 statues cast by Gormley stand atop buildings, on both sides of the Thames River in public spaces and face the exhibition entrance. Ironically, these works are reminiscent of Canadian sculptor Peter von Tiesenhausen's *The Watcher* (1997-2002) figures that travelled Canada to be installed variously from Calgary, to Kitchener-Waterloo, to Hamilton, Montréal, then Pouch Cove in Newfoundland, then on by ship to Tuktoyaktuk in the Northwest Territories, through the Yukon to the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia and then back to Demmitt in Alberta where von Tiesenhausen lives. Gormley's figures are cast with their seams showing and poignantly they play on and with the notion of manufacture. And of course these figures can alternatively have extended arms, or be propped in relation to walls, crouching, or standing, or simply laid down like objects. These sculptures are object figures whose creation relates to performance and the act of creation, with Gormley being the subject of the casting, deep breathing, controlled breathing, all manner of Vipassana meditation (he practised this with Goenka), enable him to establish a relation between inner space and exterior place. The propped cast metal figures cause us to consider the body's relation to architecture – itself a body of sorts, or container. In the Hayward show, five cast iron figures hang upside down like Butoh dancers. One of these figures that are part of









*Critical Mass II* (1995) (originally 60 figures), even hangs in a stairwell at the Hayward, and adjacent, not too far away *Chair* (1987–88) a leaden object exists and carries 2 egg-like forms.

*Drawn* (2000/2007) is actually a room or white cube whose corners are designated by Gormley's sitting forms, almost identical with legs stretched and arms raised. These figures could be any person and the bodies' relation to architecture was never more explicitly presented. The bodies here are too dominant to my mind, and almost overbearing in relation to the cube-like space which is inhibiting, almost closed. Perhaps this is Gormley's true intention, as the body itself is architecture, and a natural architecture linked to our primordial origins in nature. Another earlier Gormley sculpture cum installation *Mother's Pride III* (1982/2007) was created in an era when the Berlin Wall still existed and notions of austerity, poverty and scarcity, hence the bodily form cut into the shape of multiple slices of bread. More disquieting are the hundreds of lead-cast 38 calibre bullets heaped like a pile of seeds titled *Seeds III/IV* (1989/1993).

*Space Station* (2007) is a complex, box-like 27-ton structure that looks like it grew in sections of Corten steel plate. It looks as if it can be deconstructed. Its labyrinthine character suggests organization, institution, but it all hangs together outside any specific context. The space it occupies is real, but it's a model, an expanded model. As Gormley states: "The key question for me is how to unhinge peoples comfort with the existing dimensions of their habitat. In doing this, a certain space is created that hopefully triggers feelings of exposure, nausea, perhaps fear, yet also excitement."

The real venue is *Blind Light* (2007), specifically commissioned for the exhibition. People are referring to it as the "fog room", and line up to go into this large enclosed glass architectural cube. It's a rectangular fish bowl of sorts filled with fog. After entering, you can barely see your hand when it is four inches from your face. You definitely cannot see your body, arms, and legs. Here, inside, you can leave the world outside. The effect is pure phenomenology. You lose any sense of your bodily or physical presence. The mind remains cognizant. You see the surface of our eyes, occasional vague outlines of other people experiencing the same sensations. The effect is ambiguous. *Blind Light* relates bodily experience to structures of architecture.

A downstairs gallery contains row upon row of concrete blocks. These blocks were scaled to the body size of actual citizens of the Swedish city of Malmö. *Allotment II* (1996) as the piece is titled is like a city of built forms, each the size of a human body, generalized into geometry. There are dark openings, orifices of the body; a mouth, two ears, an anus or genitals, again rectangles or cubes.



Anthony Gormley, *Space Station*, 2007. Corten mild steel plate. Courtesy of the artist and Jay Jopling/White Cube, London. Photo: © Stephen White

We walk between and through these shapes precariously, angling our way through this interior landscape, aware of our own bodily presence. The least successful of Gormley's sculptures are the agglomerations of welded steel rods and tubes that extend from centrifugal points out into space, *Matrices and Expansions* (2006–2007). Their works look like exercises, visual demonstrations so contrary to the weight and mass pieces Gormley is known to achieve with such elegance. Like molecular or science modules, they seem distant and disengaged. Whatever Gormley is trying to communicate with these works, they could as easily have been executed on a computer screen. We do not need the physical rendition. And where is that accidental burr that might catch our imagination out of the corner of our eye, and bring a human point to these works. *Hatch* (2007) a room full of aluminium rods builds an illusory optical effect seems a sensational afterthought. One begins to question the social vacuum, even if they are innocuous, physically threatening ... or user friendly. Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, was a user friendly sort of space contraption too. But these are very minor quibbles.

Curated by Ralph Rugoff and Jacky Klein, *Blind Light*, by one of the most engaging artists of our era, is a great show to see. It proves Antony Gormley to be one artist of our era who has a global reach, and pursues his vision, and takes chances, always with a sense of the body's relation to space.

JOHN K. GRANDE

**John K. Grande's *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists*** was published by State University of New York Press in 2004 and in a Spanish edition by the Fundacion Manrique in 2005. Other publications include *A Biomass Continuity* (a collaboration with Coco Gordon (Go if Press) and *In Memory of the World* (Go If, 2006). Grande's *Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream* will be published by Pari Publishing, in Italy, in 2007. [www.grandescritique.com](http://www.grandescritique.com)





from the installation, 'Courtesy of the artist and Jay Jopling/White Cube, London, Photo: © Stephen White



© Marina Abramović, 1995-2000 years, 'Courtesy of the artist and Jay Jopling/White Cube, London, Photo: © Stephen White

