INTRODUCTION & ESSAYS ARTISTS CONVERSATIONS EXHIBITION TOUR

DAVID GETSY AND GEOF OPPENHEIMER

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DAVID GETSY: Why graphite?

GEOF OPPENHEIMER: Graphite is material that in both industrial usage and culture holds and neutralizes energy. When I was asked to be in the exhibition, I was really interested in this kind of alternate, inert quality of the material. So rather than thinking about it as a traditional artistic tool, I started to think about it conceptually and was taken by this idea of pulling in and holding energy—in this case, a kind of societal, psychic energy **[fig. 1]**.

FIGURE 1

GETSY: There are all of these great polarities running through the piece. For example, between the figurative and the nonfigurative, or between the idea of one object being like a statue and the neon elements being like architecture. And so they're both playing off each other and giving us these distinctions through which you're trying both to find yourself in it and to develop meaning out of it. As viewers, we literally have to locate ourselves in relationship to these distinctions in the piece.

At one point, you said that the piece overall is about the relationship between the self and the citizen—between one's convictions and what one is compelled to believe by the culture or society that one is in. This big theme is echoed by the investment in polarities that runs through the work on multiple levels, both conceptual and formal. For instance, accessing the history of the statue or the sculptural object brings this sort of intimate, one-to-one bodily comparison between us and that freestanding object. At the same time, the hanging triangle with neon words around it speaks to signs and architecture. We locate ourselves in relation to it in a very different way, so that it literally surrounds us with its light. We have to circle around it to see all the words. These are two very different ways of looking at art, two different scales, and two options for the viewer trying to locate themselves between the polarities you present.

OPPENHEIMER: It also, I think importantly, becomes part of the institution. Both within the museum, but also the type of aesthetics it's deploying. It's a hanging sign, something you would see in an airport.

I wanted to make a relation between those two very different historical ways of working and different cultural ways of making forms.

GETSY: So, let's dive into the making a bit and talk about the cast graphite, because casting is

essential here. I was fortunate enough to see the prototype object that was the basis for the form that becomes the graphite object. It was full of all of these different materials of various kinds, all of which became incorporated into the final form.

All of the prototype objects you built up to make the form of the figure have been obscured in the final, cast object. Their outer shapes will remain, but they are all going to be smoothed out in that sort of inky shell that the graphite cast will be. This is more about that idea of it holding in contradictions, tensions, and energies that is a theme of the work. The shell of the casting makes this really apparent.

As the viewer walks up to it, what at first appears as a unified metal sculpture will begin to yield different details and echoes of the different kinds of materials and objects that were molded to make the cast **[fig. 2]**. It has everything from the found object to the random blobs that were created through different materials, to actual human bone and teeth. It also has the casting of the ear with a hearing aid on it. And so there are all of these different things that are

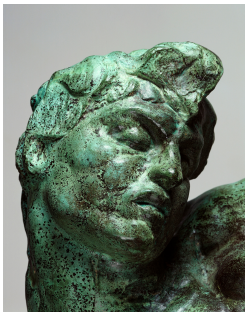
FIGURE 2

themselves very different categories of objects that have been forced together and made one through the practice of casting.

In the nineteenth century, sculptors worked in such a way that material transcriptions of their sculpted forms transferred through casting from one material to the next. The sculptor would make something in clay that would be cast in plaster. The plaster would be cast in bronze, and the form would transfer from one to the next. But in the twentieth century, there are a number of artists who use casting to absorb other materials and objects, to bring things in, instead of just this kind of pure form that's created.

As you know, I've done a lot of work on Rodin. And I think one of the interesting things about Rodin's work is that he prefigures a lot of this by forcing viewers to pay attention to the original material that he handled and where he left his marks **[fig. 3]**. This primed viewers to start paying attention to the objecthood of sculpture and to start talking about these things in a slightly different way. 1

FIGURE 3



OPPENHEIMER: One of the many things I've learned from looking at Rodin is the self-consciousness of his material. In looking at his later work especially, there is a difficult, lovely tension between an awareness of the raw baseness of the way he works his material and the form being rendered. There is an empathetic awareness of creation. The artist is making something intentionally for the viewer as a communicative device. It's an affirmative object of contemplation.

I really like that. It's one of the reasons that I work in sculpture, or I guess in art. There is an intentionality to objecthood that exists in art that doesn't exist in the same emotive, communicative way that you see in industrial design, like the plates that are on the table in front of us and things like that.

My love of Rodin is for that reason. You look at a Rodin and you see Rodin. You know, you see the artist's hand at work, specifically making something for the viewer to look at in a way that you don't with his contemporaries. I think casting does that incredibly well.

GETSY: Rodin does this in such an overemphatic way. In part because, of course, the great fiction of Rodin's work is that it is actually materially transcribed through casting twice. He really only worked in clay and then that object is turned into plaster, which he then sometimes manipulated and in his later life would recombine in some very interesting ways.

But the bronze objects that people associate with his hand were outsourced to other people. And so I think what's interesting is that Rodin himself embodies a kind of contradiction. He raises the immediacy of the acts of making and the objecthood of sculpture, but does so in a medium that actually is about material removal and distance. The famous marks that are his are actually staged marks of authenticity. His example raised significant questions about the literal object, about objects bearing the traces of their own acts of making, about material histories, and also about the meaning of casting as art practice itself. While Rodin used casting to freeze and to record gesture, others expanded on these ideas after him to make casting, itself, gestural—that is, to make the casting process not just a recording process or a preservation technique, but the key moment of the production of form.

Looking to the way you do this in your work, what's quite interesting is that you amplify this with your choice of material. Graphite is a very uncommon material in which to cast something. Casting is the moment of making the final form from separate components, and you highlight that by choosing a material that will be unfamiliar to most people as being able to be cast in the first place. I think this

gives the object its own kind of strangeness.

Looking at its strange surface, we're struck by the relationship between the object's visual absorption, reflection, murkiness, and all of those other formal qualities that make it difficult to discern just what we are looking at (and what it once was). The more we look at it, the more we see those prototype objects and gestures that were memorialized in it beginning to emerge in the surface itself. And so the longer one looks at it, the more one will begin to take what at first looks like a very unbroken, smooth surface and begin to see the variations within it. It moves from a unified object to a disunity of parts, held together through the particular surface of the cast graphite. This is how it formally accesses some of the bigger content themes we talked about at first.

OPPENHEIMER: I wanted the sculpture to be figurative but also compositional, like components coming together to form a larger whole. If you look at Freud, the id and the superego, casting multiple parts into one and then having the ability to go back in and work the graphite. You can make it smooth. You can make it matte.

GETSY: You've also mentioned it as kind of being the relationship between the irrational and the rational. Another polarity is between, say, the personal and the institutional or cultural. The one that I really like is between self and citizen.

Because again, self feels like we own it. Citizen is something that already invokes the fact that we are able to be citizens and that that makes us legible within a larger institutional structure as being individuals.

OPPENHEIMER: Well, to me there is a parallel between the self and the irrational and the citizen and the rational. The id and the superego. A citizen implies, to me anyway, that one is part of a larger body politic. This entity is comprised of and is divisible by the citizen, the self. It's not the other way around. Citizen implies that you are a member but still beholden to the rights and responsibilities of the larger structure.

And so that's why, formally, the relationship between these two things is so dependent on the room at the IMA, how they're going to be situated together and that they're read as a singular piece. It's not two pieces. It's not a diptych, but it's one sculpture that is multiple components. Those components have very different aesthetics based on their roles in the drama, their roles in the story.

GETSY: When you think about them as a unit, it's really interesting. Because even though it's one unit, there are two parts. But that's exactly this tension between singularity and multiplicity that we were talking about earlier.

The neon elements not only speak to this language of institutional signs—signs as in neon signs, not semiotic signs, though they're there, too. But they speak to this language and broadcast it outward. There is nothing in the center. I asked you what's going to happen if someone goes into the center of the triangle? I know I'll do this when I see the installation, and I'm sure everyone else will. But there's nothing there.

It is not the fulfilling, revelatory moment that could happen if one was creating, say, a work of art with a gap in the middle of it. Sometimes that's the place to be. But that part of the sculpture is all about broadcasting out and not having a core but being all matrix, broadcasts, context. And so it's interesting that it can only be experienced from outside of it as the addressee of the neon and of those words.

So that outward focus is played off against the inward focus of something that reads in the language of figurative sculpture as being kind of self-contained and unbroken. I think that's a compelling way to think about this larger tension of how they are both one and the same.

OPPENHEIMER: You're totally right. As I saw it, especially in conceiving of the piece before it was made, as theater. You know, we're the viewer externalized from the scene, watching the protagonist, i.e., the figurative sculptural element in the setting.

The citizen and the person, it's a figure in a landscape. The landscape is the cultural context, the societal framework of the sign. And the figurative sculpture is the citizen in that scene.

I thought a lot about what you said when you asked about the center. Because I almost never even conceived of someone looking up the skirt like that. I like the fact that nothing is there. It's better that the center is hollow than there being some giveaway in there.

But it's a theatrical piece to me, in the sense that it's meant to be viewed from the front. The figurative sculpture has, for me anyway, very much a front. And I suppose the sign does, too.

GETSY: Well, I'm always interested in how unruly viewers are—no one ever does what you want them to do. Also when I think about some of your earlier work, like *Public Sculpture (Edits)* (2009–10), the organization of your sculptural objects sometimes does imply a kind of stage-like, or proscenium, organization **[fig. 4]**. At least, for instance, the way that some of them are photographed. But I really see this one as having that kind of theatrical setting, and having a front.

FIGURE 4

But viewers are going to dive right in. And what's great about this is that we can think about the way the thematics of the piece then manifest themselves in that circumambulatory encounter. As people are moving around, they will struggle to see, for instance, the figure in relationship to the light that's being given off.

They will have to be circulating. They can never see all of the signs at once. You can't easily look at the two components of the whole sculpture together. So they'll be looking up. They'll be looking down. In other words, the experience of being in that stage set with the protagonist and the institution actually creates these kinds of disjunctions for the viewer as well, where they will be always looking back and forth between the two comparing, trying to find easy relations.

I think it'll be interesting to watch people's heads while they're moving through. Because there will be a constant back and forth **[fig. 5]**.

FIGURE 5

And what's nice is that the component objects actually embed this multiplicity in themselves. If, again, one of the themes of the piece is that which is singular is actually multiple, and that there are tensions held together in order to maintain the fiction of one's self, that "I" who speaks. To be either the self or the citizen is actually to take on all this stuff that's not me, that's external. So all of those multiplicities are in there.

If we look at, for instance, the figurative object. One of the things that struck me, with my history-of-modern-sculpture glasses on, is that the formal organization of it at first speaks to a tradition of Cubist sculpture, in which it sort of looks like, say, a Julio Gonzáles or a Pablo Picasso that are constructed from facets. Like these examples, it does have a very clear frontality.

When I first walked up to it, I thought I knew which way it should face. "This is the front," I thought, because it seems to have a face. And faciality is quite an important component of all figurative sculpture, or any sculpture that even implies the human body. Because every time we see something in relationship to the human body, we automatically think about the orientation of that body in terms of the vertical and the horizontal. Human bodies have a front and a back. And that's played out in most sculpture that references the body.

In your work, the graphite object is intelligibly in relation to the history of

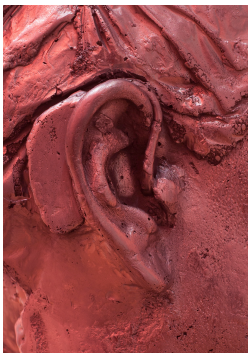
modern sculpture, but it is also readable in terms of its relationship to human morphology. But when we walk up to it, what we thought was the front—the face—isn't. We realize that it's not the face. Yes, we can see some teeth underneath it. There's a jaw. But then we're confronted with that great moment where we see an ear, and an assisted ear at that.

And so automatically, it disrupts our expectation of what we thought we knew. So it literally deflects us around the work. But it also tells us at the very beginning that what we think we're seeing is always something else. It's something from the side.

Can you talk a little bit about why it's an assisted ear, and why that decision was made?

OPPENHEIMER: I'm interested in communication in general. A lot of my work has issues of either broadcast or reception. In this case, I wanted to make a figurative project that was also kind of a prosthetic, something that extends the ability or corrects a deficiency in the self. So a hearing aid seemed like a really good metaphorical object for the deficiencies of man **[fig. 6]**.

FIGURE 6



What are the kinds of technological armatures we have made to help ourselves comprehend one another?

The way the hearing aid I used is built echoes the internal structures of the ears; the drum bones have the same kind of swirl that the hearing aid does as it arches around the back of the ear. I was interested in the kind of formal mirroring of the technological with the biological as well.

GETSY: I think it's a key moment of the whole object. It's the synecdoche for the whole project. Because again, the entire history of sculpture has taken the human body as its basis. I know it's a grand statement, but it's more or less true. Whether that's from the Greek statuary tradition up to minimalism, installation art, and beyond, into participatory work. So it's there as the denominator.

But in those multiple traditions, the human body is often staged as if it is self-evident and autonomous, in many ways, as either a symbol, or as a self-contained form, or everything else. And there's this whole tradition of the human body being used to stand in for ideal subjectivity, citizenship, and humanity. The entire process of making an allegory is always to personify it.

The human body as a self-evident and self-sufficient

symbol or reference underlies these traditions. And so what I like about the use of the hearing aid in this work is that, as you say, it points to the ways in which the human body is often supplemented. The hearing aid makes the ear *more* about sound than a representation of an ear alone. (When was the last time anyone thought about what Michelangelo's *David*, the Statue of Liberty, or a Henry Moore could hear or not?)

But also, the hearing aid (an outdated one at that) is a powerful symbolic moment in the work that puts into brackets the entire figurative tradition that you're citing, saying that the human body never exists on its own. Again, it's like the relationship between citizen and self. Being "me" is never self-contained. Singularity turns into multiplicity. What appears to be a modernist metal sculpture is revealed to be a collection of objects fused together via casting. The figure we thought addressed us with its faciality turns away, leaving us unsure where to have our gaze met. The recognizable ear we see that evokes the human body gains a real sense of sound only through the addition of the hearing aid. There's never any self-sufficient or self-contained elements; we are always brought outside, to the side by these tactics.

We are subjects only by virtue of being embedded—

OPPENHEIMER: —that it's only within our larger societies that one can be perceived as singular.

GETSY: And that recognizes us as subjects. One cannot speak unless one has also become the object of a language. What's interesting about the work is that you're taking on that larger question of the complexities of subjectivity and its relationship to ideology, but also lacing in all of these elements that are about the history of art. And there's a fun set of intertexts that happen between institutional critique, installation art, modern sculpture, Rodin, and others in which you sort of gleefully jumble all of those references up.

OPPENHEIMER: To me, it is every day. I'm a child of my time. So all these issues were just sort of taken for granted as I was coming up as an artist.

So I see them all there. But they're allowed to be jumbled up now. Because they don't have the historical particularity that they once did any longer.

GETSY: Exactly. And there's always the question with sculpture, of why make sculpture now? Or what is not sculpture?

And that's why I think your choice—to actually use the practice of casting, and to create something that looks like a figurative sculpture, but also to not be content with that—is an interesting retort. Because as a sculptor, you're also working within this language that you received.

OPPENHEIMER: I'm as interested in institutional critique as I am in Rodin. I mean, of course, there is a difference. But I don't see an enormous distinction between them within the history of sculpture, in that they are on the same continuum.

And I see myself on that same continuum. I'm a sculptor. I'm invested in these kinds of traditional ideas. But how those traditional ideas and forms can implicate the contemporary contexts we're in.

GETSY: To say it another way, you have to absorb influences to say something new. It's back to that question of the self–citizen polarity. We're neither just ourselves for ourselves nor ourselves for others.

And so I'm beginning to think what you're doing, in practice, is so much about things like remix culture.

OPPENHEIMER: Yeah, absolutely.

GETSY: In which constantly new contexts and oppositions can be made highly particularized and useful—ones that speak to these earlier contexts, but neither degrade nor pay homage to them. And so that would be one of the ways in which to think about that, all of the different elements in one.

But maybe that's too simple. Maybe I'm struggling too hard to sew it up.

OPPENHEIMER: I think because of the nature of the piece, it's not one that can easily be sewn up. This idea of the self and a larger group—that is the fundamental concern of the project.

GETSY: So, tell me why you've titled the work *Love and Other Abstractions*.

OPPENHEIMER: To me, that title makes sense.

GETSY: And so in terms of the whole piece, that dynamic between the self and the institutions we've been talking about is most directly experienced with love, which is both a deeply felt personal potential and an abstract concept that is endlessly postulated and defined as a shared, social, and common value. It's the relationship between the individual's experience of themselves—their passions and desires—and what you've talked about as the institutional or rational parts of being a member of society—which is about obligation, community, relationships to others, and beliefs that are given, shared, abandoned, taken on, imposed. Because all of those things can vacillate between positive or negative, depending on how they're being experienced. It's either something for everyone, or something that's—

OPPENHEIMER: The police state.

GETSY: Yes, that's the extreme limit of that rationality and external control. So all of these are

the public and social outer arenas that are seen as the realm of the rational and the commonsense. Then there's the individual's sense of their own agency or autonomy as well as their own irrationality. Love is the great example of a commonly defined abstraction that we're made to feel is uniquely our own.

OPPENHEIMER: Precisely.

GETSY: Love's not just our own emotion—it's a social obligation we're supposed to aspire to. Remember, too, that love is often defined or evidenced in terms of procreation and society's future. I'm thinking of the overemphasis on love as procreation, as normative futurity, and all of that. It's important to note that such a transmutation of feelings of connection and passion into the greater procreative good has been used to validate certain kinds of love and invalidate others. All of it is suddenly not about what you feel, but what your love means for others. It is both the thing that is so deeply personal, but also—

OPPENHEIMER: So public.

GETSY: Yes, so public. It becomes so much about one's social standing, the ability to have legal status, and everything else. Not only is it not just for you because there's another person involved. It's also not just for you because as soon as you declare your love, or inhabit that societal expectation, it becomes—

OPPENHEIMER: A social construction.

GETSY: Right. It's again this idea that every unity—that is, every individual—is defined by polarity between being for oneself and being for others, between self and citizen, between the individual and the institutional. There's no outside of those polarities. With love, for instance, all of the personal and the individual is flushed out into the world as soon as it's named "Love." Even if you feel it deeply, intimately, and uniquely, it is not just your own because of the institutional and social construction of love as an ideal, as a cultural norm, and as a defining value of one's legal and social standing. It becomes a set of assumptions that one has to inhabit—even, it should be said, before one might have a chance to feel it for oneself. It's mine only because it's society's, and it's society's only because I experience it as mine.

OPPENHEIMER: Love is the abstraction that connects these two worlds.

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