

## **Guardian Unlimited, Tuesday, November 6, 2001**

'He made looking at art an adventure'

Sculptor Antony Gormley tells Stuart Jeffries why the world is poorer for the loss of Ernst Gombrich

Stuart Jeffries

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When Antony Gormley was 15, he read a book that inspired him to become an artist. It was *The Story of Art* by Ernst Gombrich, the Vienna-born art historian who died aged 92 on Saturday. Nothing especially surprising in that perhaps: for the past half-century the book, which has gone through 16 editions and been translated into 32 languages since its publication in 1950, has been the chief introduction to western art for millions of people around the world.

Why does Gormley, now Britain's leading sculptor, think the book was, and is, so influential? "The great gift he gave to us was to make the living process of art understandable to us all. Rather than a dry cultural history, he made looking at art - that perceptual experience - an adventure. *The Story of Art* has this overwhelming thought: 'There is really no such thing as art - there are only artists.' The book unfolds as an intensely human adventure story.

"Compare him with more recent critical theorists of art such as Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Baudrillard. Gombrich is so refreshing in that he's a humanist. He sees art as human history and it's for that reason that *The Story of Art* was so appealing to so many."

Gormley stresses that Gombrich was one of many Jewish thinkers who came to Britain during the 1930s and 40s and revolutionised intellectual life in this country: "Our heritage was enriched so much before and during the war by people such as Gombrich. Along with Sigmund Freud, there was the philosopher Karl Popper, publishers such as Weidenfeld and Nicolson, Thames and Hudson and Phaidon. Our cultural life has benefited enormously. It's perhaps something we have to thank National Socialism for - the only thing."

Why did *The Story of Art* have such an impact on the young Gormley? "It made the whole possibility, not only of studying art but also of becoming an artist, a reality. It wasn't just a view on to another world that he gave me, but a passage that one could travel into the future. That's why, personally, I feel I owe him a debt. As with many others, his book gave me a gift - but it was also a challenge. The question he states that strikes me very strongly is: 'What is the adequate challenge to the life of an artist?'

"That is why he is so sceptical about so much of contemporary art. The challenge many contemporary artists posed themselves isn't adequate, he thought. He was concerned that the forces that drive the art market, and its concern with fashion and sensationalism, are taking artists away from the deeper issues." Gombrich disliked, for instance, Damien Hirst exhibiting the car cass of a sheep, saying that this was sensationalist and symptomatic of social problems, rather than an aesthetic expression.

Gombrich had no such misgivings about Gormley. The men met three times, most significantly in 1996 for a long conversation about art in general and Gormley's work in particular. "We met because Phaidon was preparing a monograph on me. Because all Gombrich's books were published by Phaidon and because he was so influential on me, it seemed obvious and ideal to meet him and record the conversation."

Their discussion can be read in the book *Antony Gormley*, published in Phaidon's Contemporary Art Monograph series. It presents a fascinating picture of two men eloquently discussing art - up to the point where their visions diverge, the Viennese intellectual concerned chiefly with the creation of what Gormley calls "convincing artificiality" (ie, works of art that represent the world) and the English sculptor committed to an artistic project steeped in multiculturalism and spiritual concerns.

Gormley had taken the challenge that Gombrich had thrown down in *The Story of Art*, but gone in a direction that his mentor could not - or did not care to - follow. "My work doesn't establish a convincing artificiality but rather a relation between art and lived reality and the living body in a particular position at a particular time," Gormley explains. "That's what I want to capture, and so my sculpture is the result of art in the time of mechanical reproduction. My sculpture is a thing in the world rather than illusions, which are what interested Gombrich."

Gombrich was especially interested in Gormley's sculpture *Field* for the British Isles from the point of view of the psychology of perception (a perennial subject for the Viennese art historian but one given its most considered treatment in his 1960 book *Art and Illusion*). "He was really concerned with the development of the syntax of looking at paintings and sculpture - that is what he wrote about in *Art and Illusion* and *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*. He was examining the psychology of the act of looking and deconstructing that."

As a result, Gombrich "was trying to understand in a scientific and unemotional way this work on to which people have projected huge amounts of feeling". Indeed, he submits Gormley's work to Töpffer's law - the idea that that expressiveness does not depend on observation or skill but on self-observation. Rudolphe Töpffer was a pioneer of comic strips who argued that one can acquire the fundamentals of practical physiognomy without ever studying the face, head or human contours. Gombrich thus responds to *Field* as an illusion rather than as a spiritual or emotionally charged work.

But Gormley still admires his childhood mentor: "I love Gombrich because he was not in any way high-horsey or pompous. He is so generous in his writing because he doesn't want to waste people's time. There are things he leaves out, and probably for the good reason that it would result in waffle. The great thing about him is how he successfully applies Wittgenstein's principle: 'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent.' I thank him for that unreservedly."

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