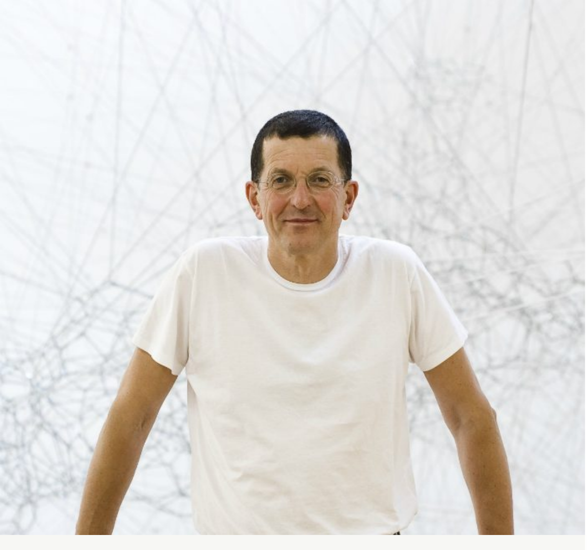
Antony Gormley

Feb 2, 2020



CONNECTING THE WORLD. The sculptor Antony Gormley is perhaps best known for his large installations in public space. A major exhibition of his work was recently held at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. His next exhibition is at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris Marais.

Antony Gormley, you are from an Irish and German family, and were educated at Cambridge University and art schools in London. You also went to India for several years. Why?

My father set up pharmaceutical factories in India and I was fascinated by his stories and the objects he brought home. The late 1960s was a time of consciousness expansion, and after Cambridge I studied Buddhist meditation in India and Sri Lanka for three years. After a very long, classical western education, it was incredible to immerse myself in another form of learning that was just about attending to being with the greatest degree of concentration possible. Then in 1974, I had a choice: Is this going to be my life, or should I follow my other vocation, as an artist? I decided on the latter.

Why did you become a sculptor?

Sculpture is the most immediate way of literally changing the world. I was interested in poetry, writing, dance, and drawing, but the biggest challenge was to make something that didn't exist before and put it, it didn't matter where: in the garden, on the beach, on the road. And then see how people reacted.

You also draw?

Yes, a lot. Drawing for me is the beginning of everything, the way of making a map of what you might do next. It's very useful when trying to think: How with a single line can I evoke the containment of architecture?

How did you start?

At art college I was excited to have free access to stone, to wood, to resin. I wanted to try everything: I was making experimental pieces with earth and clay, I dipped old hospital sheets in plaster and placed them directly over the bodies of my friends. In India people sleep on the streets covered in their *dhoti*. This stayed with me as an image about the relation of the individual to the mass, and the fragility of that.

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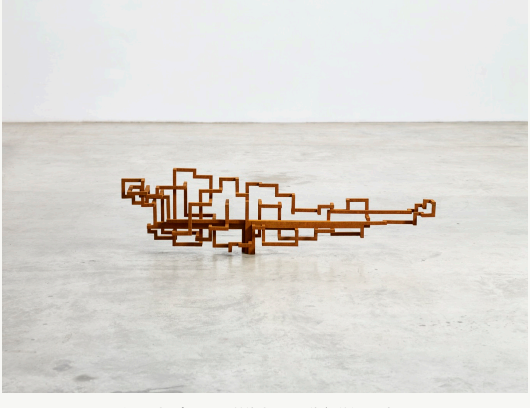


Antony Gormley LEVEL, 2019. Cast Iron. 49.5 x 186.7 x 33.9 cm.

Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London – Paris – Salzburg.

Photograph by Stephen White & Co., London. © Antony Gormley

Antony Gormley, when did you decide to be your own protagonist?

Deciding to collapse the artist/model distance by using my own body happened gradually. I was looking at bread – sliced, industrially produced bread – the material that is transformed into energy by human life. I was looking at clothing, and the first works were my clothes cut in half and pinned to the wall like the skin of an animal, where I'm saying: This is the location of human life. The next stage was to think: Can I make a registration of my own existence as a kind of testimony, not in terms of a heroic representation, but in terms of the question: What is the human life? My work 'Mould' happened in 1981/2. I'd just got married to Vicken, and she moulded me in this very tight foetal position, with my mouth open to breathe.

What about your pieces like the Angel of the North, *or* Event Horizon, *works on a beach or a cliff or a rooftop?*

They're still asking the same question in different ways. What is a human being and where does a human being fit in the scheme of things? What is the relationship between mind and matter? How do we reconcile that on the one hand we are an object in the world, we exist as matter, but inside this body that is a thing rests consciousness that has the potential of infinite extension? Let's think about the body not as a pre-existing appearance, but as a place of becoming, of energy, of transformation. Let's think of it as about potential rather than memorial. The long history of sculpture in the West has always been about memorial, often about heroism, about the recognition of suffering, or about sexuality and the idea of the female body as a zone of beauty and perfection. I think those are all dead stories.

Is the body the basic idea of your work?

In a digital age we have made the body redundant for the majority of our conscious time. The body was made to move, and we spend our living time sitting, attending to screens. All of our impressions of the world come through the body, and through it all our expressions are communicated to the world. Sculpture encourages firsthand, direct, physical experience. It is a way of countering this disappearance into the virtual.

Are you trying to do something that has spiritual value?

Everything I do invites people to think, to reconsider their energy and how they relate to other people, to space, to time, to nature.

Were you pleased by your recent exhibition at the Royal Academy in London?

The show was four years in the genesis, it took two years to prepare the building to support the weight and I was very pleased with the results across those thirteen naturally lit rooms in the very centre of London. Whenever I visited there was an atmosphere of active contemplation – that was the biggest encouragement. There was a sense of reflection and projection in the way that people were moving quite slowly, engaging with the work, thinking: What is this that I'm looking at?

Was it a journey into your work?

It was not a retrospective, but it examined how sculpture has affected me and what I feel its potential is. The beginning moment of coming into the courtyard and finding this tiny iron baby was a reinforcement that this is art about life. The real subject was always the viewer. Art can be simply an open space in which possibility can be entertained, exchanges can happen. People can speak of their intimate and personal truth to one another. My objects invite them to do that, and invite them to say: What is this and what am I in relation to this?

Do you like having exhibitions?

Exhibitions can be productive. The Royal Academy show compared works made over 40 years and allowed them to talk to each other in a way they had never been able to before. But exhibitions are very demanding and can also distract from the inner evolution of the work itself.

“Sculpture is about feelings, then about the recognition of those feelings, and then the inquiry into those feelings.”

Antony Gormley, is there a fil rouge from one exhibition to another?

Yes. An exhibition is an opportunity to make a proposition and for you to take account of the journey you have made.

Next you will have an exhibition called In Habit *in Paris which opens at Thaddaeus Ropac's Marais gallery on 12 March 2020?*

The main work is a singular line about two hundred metres long, made out of hollow aluminium tube. It activates the space and mimics the way that architecture divides and structures space, but without solid walls.

What is the proposition of In Habit*?*

Human beings make a habitat, a world. The show as a whole asks: To what extent, having made a world, does the world make us?

What objects are you producing for this show?

Two forms. 'Run' is the main work in the main space; it plays off the architecture that's there already, a diagnosis of the given space of the gallery. The other works in the show are diagnostic mappings of the space of a body.

You do this string like labyrinth, where people can lose themselves or talk?

The body is both an instrument and a catalyser of space. Whether I am using structures that activate space or making indices of the body, the main purpose is to give a reflective instrument to the viewer.

Who will own this work?

'Run', the big work, will be destroyed afterwards, but the invitation is there for somebody to commission another example, which would then be a diagnosis of a specific space offered by that.

You won the Turner Prize in 1994. You are a Royal Academician. You were knighted in 1997?

I reluctantly admit to having been subsumed by the establishment.

Nevertheless when someone goes into one of your spaces who doesn't know who you are….

I think that's better. Sculpture is about feelings, then about the recognition of those feelings, and then the inquiry into those feelings. I want to use my own existence as a testing ground because that's the only thing that I live inside. I'm not interested in getting stuck in some stylistic cul de sac. I have to surprise myself, to keep saying to myself: Can we look at this problem this way, even though yesterday I was looking at it that way?

You like to see your work in public spaces; in a park, on a beach, in a square. Who do you work for?

I work for the work. The work is the master. Art is a gift. Art is a vocation. Art doesn't make sense unless it's shared. Nobody asked for art to be privatised.

At the same time art today is an investment.

The institutionalisation and commodification of art in our time is ridiculous, but I am also taking full advantage. People buy my work and that allows me to do extraordinary things such as work on the seashore, or this experiment in New York where we're going to make the first 'Clearing' without a building, at an average height of eight meters, on Pier 3 of Brooklyn Bridge Park.

You are doing this with BTS, the young K-pop musicians?

Yes, and their 280 million strong fan club. A quarter of the world's population now is in the age group 17 to 25. There's never been such a high percentage of very young people before, and the idea of Connect is to help them re-evaluate their present circumstances, attitudes, and potentialities. Connect aspires to make bridges between generations, between languages, between different cultural contexts.

Do you consider yourself a practical philosopher?

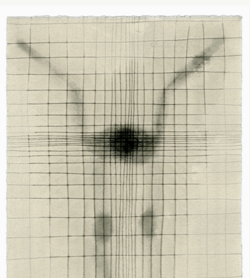
I want to interrogate life, and there are many ways of doing it. Because sculpture is embodied it can be a thing in the world. It's an expression of hope if you can do something that is not functionally necessary, but still place it in the world.

An engineer?

I am interested to see how something works, to go beyond the appearances and investigate the function. If that's an engineer's mentality, then I'm an engineer.

Do you like commissions?

There's nothing better than being asked to come and look at this building, field or landscape and think of something that you might do there. Context is critical for the way that art works.



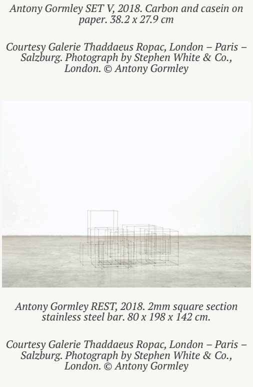
Antony Gormley HEAD, 2019. Cast Iron. 187.7 x 38.8 x 37.4 cm.

Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London – Paris – Salzburg. Photograph by Stephen White & Co., London. © Antony Gormley

Antony Gormley, ANGEL OF THE NORTH, 1998. Steel. 2000 x 5400 x 220 cm

Commissioned by the Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council, Gateshead, England

Permanent installation, Gateshead, England. Photograph by Sally Ann Norman. © Antony Gormley



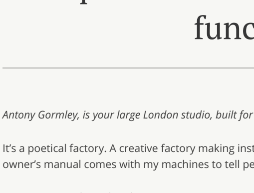
Antony Gormley SET V, 2018. Carbon and casein on paper. 38.2 x 27.9 cm

Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London – Paris – Salzburg. Photograph by Stephen White & Co., London. © Antony Gormley

Antony Gormley IRON BABY, 1999. Cast iron 12 x 28 x 17 cm Edition of 10 plus 4 APS

Installation View, Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK, 2019 Photograph by Oak Taylor-Smith © Antony Gormley

Alain Elkann and Antony Gormley in conversation. London, 16th January 2020.



Antony Gormley REST, 2018. 2mm square section stainless steel bar. 80 x 198 x 142 cm.

Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London – Paris – Salzburg. Photograph by Stephen White & Co., London. © Antony Gormley

“Sculpture has a distinct and specific function.”

Antony Gormley, is your large London studio, built for you by David Chipperfield, like a mechanical factory?

It's a poetical factory. A creative factory making instruments of mindfulness and self-examination. No owner's manual comes with my machines to tell people how to use them.

How many people work with you?

About 50 in all now.

Do you make one piece at a time or several?

One at a time. They're pretty well all unique, but I do make some editions of the polyhedral works.

Is the material you use very important for your work?

Yes. Iron, and to a lesser extent steel, is concentrated earth material. Marble and bronze, for me, are too related to their historic use in sculpture. I like that iron is a common material without those associations.

Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons call themselves artists. Instead you say: "I'm a sculptor."

Yes, I'm a sculptor. Sculpture has a distinct and specific function. I'm very different from Damien Hirst. I am interested in the intrinsic qualities of mass, line, plane. I am interested in the distinctive languages of moulding, constructing, carving. I am interested in spatial displacement, in spatial articulation. Koons makes objects that have no resonance with their contexts. I want my works to interrogate their context. When Jeff Koons wants to present to the city of Paris this sculpture of a hand with a bunch of tulips I ask myself: What can the repeated familiarity with an object like that bring, other than despair? I don't see what it is doing, in terms of either interrogating the potential of form or material.

Which artists do you admire?

Brancusi, Giacometti and Richard Serra have all interrogated very profoundly the potentials of sculpture, and in their different ways engage the body. Art is an important tool of survival, it encourages us to feel. Brancusi's Targu Jiu and the relationship of the 'Table of Silence', 'The Gate of the Kiss' and the 'Endless Column' is extraordinary. Commissioned as a war memorial, it's all to do with the future. It's an amazing celebration of what sculpture can do.

After all these years, do you regret the career choice you made?

Certainly not! I'm just getting into my stride! I'm not afraid of death, but I'm hoping that it won't happen immediately. I still feel that I have got a lot to do. There are so many tipping points: the climate, the division between rich and poor, resources in the hands of so few of us. The big question is: What is human nature in a time of cyber society, in which we have massive digital connectivity but are all more alone than we've ever been?

London, 16 January 2020.

Portrait of Antony Gormley based on a photograph at Galleria Continua, Beijing, 2009, by Oak Taylor-Smith. All images used by kind permission.

Antony Gormley "In Habit"

12 March – 9 May 2020.

7, rue Debelleyme, 75003 Paris

This interview is available here as a podcast

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