

# SEAN KELLY

“Antony Gormley with Allie Biswas,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 17, 2016.



ANTONY GORMLEY with Allie Biswas



Antony Gormley, *Big Yield*, 2015. Mild steel bar. 219 × 111 × 99 cm. Photo: Stephen White, London. © the artist. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Antony Gormley's career spans thirty-five years, beginning with his first solo exhibition, at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, in 1981. With sculpture as a primary medium, Gormley's work has explored the relationship of the human body to space and time, emphasizing the body as place rather than object. The artist is also renowned for his permanent public works, which include *Angel of the North* (Gateshead, England; 1998), *Inside Australia* (Lake Ballard, Western Australia; 2002 – 03), *Exposure* (Lelystad, The Netherlands; 2010) and, most recently, *Chord* (MIT – Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA; 2015). *Construct*, Gormley's fifth solo exhibition at Sean Kelly Gallery is on view from May 7 until June 18, 2016.

Allie Biswas (Rail): In your TED talk from 2012 you spoke about your daily routine as a child of going upstairs to a very small room after lunch to take a nap. This was a routine imposed on you by your mother. I wanted to start with this anecdote because it seems to have created a strong impression on you, and planted a seed in some way.

Antony Gormley: I think it was my first intuition of this idea of a body being primarily a place rather than a thing. This is the old mind-body problem, but to me it wasn't a problem. It was a realization that inaction could be the doorway to deep space; something endlessly extensive and without objects. That intuition was then reinforced in my experience of Vipassana meditation, learned during my time in India. The psychonaut in the 21st century is what the astronaut was in the 20th, or what the explorer was to the 19th. In discovering human nature, there is only one direction to go: inwards. The beginning of my understanding of this was that very early childhood experience of being forced to rest.

Rail: How much time did you spend in India?

Gormley: I spent two years there.

Rail: Was this the first time that you had studied meditation? What else did you learn during the trip?

Gormley: I, like you, went to university, where I read a lot of books. I studied anthropology and art history, and I learned how to put thoughts into sentences and write them down. But I hadn't dealt with what it means to live and survive; what it means to have encounters with others that are not a given, through institutions or through family. This whole experience was of traveling without purpose. We were of that generation. We were protesting and flexing our muscles in terms of finding a voice, trying to discover who and what we were, detached from the cultural conditioning and intellectual background of a restrictive 1950s upbringing.

Rail: Was your home life quite ritualistic?

Gormley: These post-war years were suffocating. Yes, I had a highly ritualized home life. I was sent to a serious private school, and then I ended up at Cambridge. I was conditioned. Just walking out of the door and leaving all that behind, and taking one encounter with one person in one place at a time, allowing it to develop and see what happened, was another way of living. That became the pattern for my life from that point onwards. It wasn't just doing the guru thing; it was learning to live by your own devices.

Rail: There was a period of around ten years between when you left university and had your first show at the Whitechapel. People have come to associate your work with what could be formally described as the figure, but in the late '70s you were making these works, such as *Fruits of the Earth* (1978 – 79) and *Natural Selection* (1981), where the figure hasn't really emerged. How did these works develop?

Antony Gormley, *Big Skew*, 2015. Mild steel bar. 216 × 90 × 117 cm. Photo: Stephen White, London. © the artist. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Gormley: I think it's very important to realize that I don't see my work as dealing with the figure. The figure comes with a whole load of baggage. Figure suggests figurative. Figure suggests figure drawing. Figure suggests the understanding of anatomy. It suggests putting the image of the body to work, in order to make a believable narrative. The word 'figure' comes with a huge—

Rail: —There are far too many associations—

Gormley: —Which I reject. I went to the body as the found object that I happen to inhabit. All of the work that I did prior to it was an exploration of the relationship between the made and found. That's what *Natural Selection* was: twenty-four objects that alternated between the made and found, but which, paradoxically, showed this morphological progression having to do with growth. In *Fruits of the Earth*, I took a bottle of alcohol, a machete and a loaded revolver and turned them into something organic or fruit like by adding successive layers of lead. Right at the beginning there's this dialogue going on between nature and culture, making and finding—testing the difference between what something is and what it looks like.

Rail: So it was these objects that led you to think about yourself—about the body?

Gormley: It led me, inevitably, to ask: what about this thing that I actually live inside? This “spaceship” that I call a body. Can I include it among my terms of reference? A body is a displacement. We live on the other side of appearance. Can I begin to pay some kind of attention to the truth of us living within the darkness of the body—which I had experienced both in that childhood enforced rest, but also in hours and hours of sitting still in India just attending to being—in itself?

Rail: Would you say that in this way your work cannot be situated within the context of European sculpture?

Gormley: It has little to do with the history of European sculpture (even though I know that history very well). My work is about trying to bear witness to the collective, subjective experience of being embodied. I'm still trying to do that same job. I left behind the reference to the made and the grown in order to concentrate on the truth of being embodied.

Rail: *Bed* (1980 – 81) was the first work you made in which the body is identified as this found object.

Gormley: Yes, here the body is treated as displacement or rather, there is an absence that is body-shaped.

Rail: When you made *Bed*, which was a turning point in your practice, what was happening around you, in terms of sculpture?

Gormley: Well, the artists I looked at and wrestled with were Andre, Serra, and Smithson. All American, and their work was all about process. What I have tried to do is integrate their ideas about material and

structure, and bring it to bear on human embodiment. They remain a reference point. Most interesting was Serra, because he made environments that made you propriocept. That was really important for me. Serra's practice is one that I have maintained the deepest dialogue with. His processes began as materializations of active verbs, like in the lead Splash series, but after the Prop pieces, they increasingly become resonators for physical experience. It was amazing that an artist quite late in his working life could make the Torqued Ellipses. Rather than confronting us with the potential of heavy, falling plates, he makes these enclosures that are instruments for experience.

Rail: What about artists working closer to home, in London and elsewhere?

Gormley: There is a group of artists whom I still talk to and occasionally see: the likes of Richard Long, Richard Deacon, Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow, and others. They are a highly idiosyncratic bunch of people, but in dialogue with their predecessors. Tony Cragg's *New Stones – Newton's Tones* (1978) is a riposte to the romantic attitude to nature by saying; "No, we live in an industrial age and here are different types of plastic that won't degrade and that brings non-biodegradable chemical color to the elemental world." Tony Cragg collected this flotsam from the riverbank himself and laid it out in the manner of a Richard Long, but also in the manner of a litmus test, showing the toxicity of our time: an implied environmental critique. I found Tony's work really intriguing and *New Stones – Newton's Tones* remains for me one of his most relevant works.

Rail: You have been very closely tied to the city of London. I know you grew up there, and you've sustained your life there as an artist, particularly in King's Cross, where you first squatted for several years. Your studio is also there now.

Gormley: Yes, when I came back from India I lived on a boat on Paddington Canal for a while. Then I squatted in a studio just off Caledonian Road. After that we moved into a five story house and a collection of industrial buildings off King's Cross Road, which we had for seven or eight years, and it was a fantastic time. There were twenty to thirty artists working there.

Rail: I can't imagine those types of opportunities arising in London now.

Gormley: London has always been open to the counterculture and to a wide range of different lifestyles. It bothers me that it has become victim to urban exploitation. All of the possibilities that were open to me as a young artist—being able to work and associate for free—are just not as available now.

Rail: It's not looking particularly promising for artists at all. It's just too expensive to set up a studio there.

Gormley: Yes. It's all very well for the massive office developments in the financial district of the city, but what about the continuity of the creative diversity for the rest of London? The developers have moved into Hoxton and Shoreditch, and the artists have had to move out. The same has happened with the art schools. It's very difficult to think of Gilbert and George, or Barry Flanagan, or Anthony Caro, without thinking of Central Saint Martins, which was on Charing Cross Road: a place for art and fashion students; central London was part of their experience of being at school. Now Saint Martins has relocated to King's Cross and there is no art school in the old city centre. You could say that King's Cross is the new cultural quarter of London. I think that's great, but it's meaningless unless you keep artists as part of it. Twenty years or more ago Chris Ofili and Peter Doig were here, and before then Garth Evans was here. People had studios all around here, but now they have all gone.

Rail: So there isn't a noticeable artist community in the neighborhood anymore?

Gormley: There aren't many other artists. In order for a city to retain vitality, it's got to be able to carry and welcome young, creative people, and allow them to live in the texture of the inner city. We've got to fight for that. I feel so grateful to this city—it is really a fantastic place to live and to work and to just be. I think that the dialogue between new music, new forms of physical expression, new cinema is just really rich. But we won't be able to keep that richness if we don't support the spaces and places that support creative people and creative practice.

Rail: What about Event Horizon? This outdoor installation of sculptures has been situated in cities around the world over the past few years. The first time was around the South Bank in central London (2007), during your exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, and then you took the work to New York (2010).

Gormley: Event Horizon is about the relationship between the individual and the perceptual limit of the horizon in a built-up environment. It exposes a made thing to the elements.

Rail: When you showed Event Horizon in London, it was alongside your sculpture Blind Light, which was the centerpiece of your exhibition of the same name at the Hayward. In this work the viewer very much becomes the subject.

Gormley: Blind Light touches on the potential of imagination. Exclusion and insulation was critical for the early works, calling upon the viewers imaginative potential to inhabit isolated and insulated cases; however, in Blind Light you escape the dominance of the visual: you are alert, you are awake, but there are no objects. It is an object from the outside—a structure that you look at—but as a viewer it invited you to be released from appearances while appearing to others on the outside. All of my work is an invitation to inhabit the space that the sculpture displaces, but in Blind Light you are invited to inhabit it actually.

Rail: Would you say that Blind Light offered one of the most visceral experiences to the viewer?

Gormley: Mmm. Maybe. You went to the show?

Rail: I did.

Antony Gormley, *Bridge*, 1985. Lead, fiberglass, plaster, and air. 191 × 50 × 35 cm. © Antony Gormley. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Gormley: Good! Yes, I want to bring the outside in and give you an unmediated firsthand experience. I've just come back from Beijing, installing my exhibition *Host*, at Galleria Continua. Here I have combined ninety-five cubic metres of red clay from Beijing's Changping district and seawater from the nearby Tianjin Coast at a ratio of 50:50, and this floods the central space of the gallery. Like *Blind Light*, *Host* offers an elemental experience. In *Blind Light* I was trying to give people the same experience they would have in a fog at sea, or on a mountain top. With *Host* I want you to encounter the unformed potential of earth, air and water. In *Land* (2015 – 2016), which is the work I made for the Landmark Trust here in Britain, I placed four works on the coast, each facing out to sea in one of the cardinal directions. They are simply catalysts for elemental experience (in the manner of *Land, Sea and Air II* (1981 – 1894)); open spaces, void of ideological or narrative content but waiting for your attention. Sculpture is an invitation to stop and to register your own present-time experience.

Rail: In your current show at Sean Kelly, *Construct*, you have included two very early works, *Bridge* (1985) and *Mother's Pride IV* (1982, remade 2012). Why did you feel the need to bring these into the context of your new works for the show?

Gormley: Including these early works in *Construct* demonstrates that a dialogue between the internal and external has been present in the work for a long time. Both introduce the idea of mapping, from the grid created by the serial laying out of the slices of bread in *Mother's Pride IV* to the actual division of the lead skin of *Bridge*. This theme is continued in *Scaffold* (2015), a recent work that maps across the volume of the body with linear steel elements. The exhibition explores the transition from this hermetic container—the insulated and isolated body space internal to *Bridge*—to the way that the latest work has made the entire body-space not simply open but also connected to space at large. It engages with the Kantian idea that all our notions of space are body dependent and the idea of above, below, left, right, front, and back is dictated by bodily perception. The new “Big Beamer” series investigate the notion of an X, Y, and Z three-dimensional articulation of space. Rather than making a linear three-dimensional drawing as in *Scaffold* (2015), we have left voids in the mass that allow space at large to penetrate the body zone.

Antony Gormley, Scaffold, 2015. 4 mm square section stainless steel bar. 198 × 46 × 36 cm. © Antony Gormley. Photo: Stephen White, London. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Rail: The figures become noticeably more architectural within the exhibition. Your interest in mapping the internal volumes of the body is evident. I wonder: Does the body become a building for you?

Gormley: The body is certainly a construct and, to that extent, is architecture. There are two propositions in the exhibition: firstly, that the mind inhabits the body as the body inhabits architecture, and secondly, if we substitute the second term for the first can we reinterpret our spatial relationships using the language of architecture? In doing so, what does this tell us or what questions arise about how we are enmeshed in our habitat?

Rail: Would you say that you leave out any possibility of a narrative, either for the figure to be part of, or for the viewer to imagine?

Gormley: I have always been interested in “being” and attending to that with bare attention. There is no narrative. They are what they are: materializations of the space that a particular body once inhabited, and which anybody can empathetically inhabit. Your question implies that the body can only be of art if it is telling a story or representing some action. I eschew both. If there is a story, it’s the story of your life as a viewer, of the time that you engage with the work, the time of the city in the case of Event Horizon’s installation. Your question betrays all of the prejudice attached to the body. I say, “Yes, you can have the body without representation and without narrative once you treat the body less as a thing and more as a place.” I call it the “abstract” body because it is not doing anything, apart from waiting for your attention. The kind of attention I want you to give it is not to work out what the story is, or what it represents, but the opportunity to reflexively occupy the space that it offers.

Rail: How do your investigations of the human body differ when you are presenting a figure that is cast from your own body, such as the ones in Event Horizon, to when you make a figure like a Blockwork, which are comprised of rectangular iron blocks and are very abstract?

Antony Gormley, Big Form, 2015. Mild steel bar. 114 × 93 × 102 cm. © Antony Gormley. Photo: Stephen White, London. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Gormley: All sculpture is a proposition and invites one to look at the world in a certain way. The new Beamers in the exhibition are still trying to evoke the body as place, but are very much constructions and hopefully celebrate, meaningfully, their “made-ness.” The reason I chose to exhibit them first in New York is because of the memory of Event Horizon. This was an acupuncture of the city, putting these naked, Pompeii-like memories of the individual within a city grid and architectural structures of Manhattan to make you begin to look at the buildings again, to recognise their differing characters. As much as the intimacy and vulnerability of these exposed bodies at the skyline made you think about human jeopardy, I hope that they also allowed you to look at the buildings as propositions, as models. With Construct I want to bring my own conversation with architecture to the way I re-present and open my body space back to the viewer for their engagement. The works simply offer aggregates of material that call upon our empathy and projection and might cause us to reflect on our relationship to the built environment.

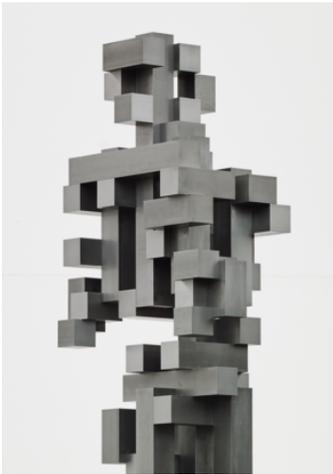
Rail: Your permanent public installation Chord has recently opened at MIT. How did this project come about and how did you approach the site?

Gormley: MIT is one of the principal institutions devoted to the reconciliation of cosmology and quantum theory. I have proposed this work which is a helical, open column connecting the floor to the skylight. It proposes (as many people like Roger Penrose, more recently MIT’s own Max Tegmark, and, not least, Einstein have already done) that geometry and mathematics is the principle means through which we can engage with reality. I have used stacking and nesting polyhedral to make Chord, a way of paying my respects to the multiverse and super string theories. This is my reply to Brancusi’s Endless Column, where space and light are played by a very live structure that is open to space and suggests the mutability of all matter. At a time when we understand that most of what we actually see is a small proportion of what there is (in terms of gravity and energy), this evocation of the elusiveness of the relationship between mass and energy seems appropriate. Chord was made to interact with chemists

and mathematicians going up and down the stairwell of MIT, reflecting the abstract agility of their minds and imaginations, while their bodies are in motion in time and space.



Antony Gormley, *Big Skew*, 2015. Mild steel bar. 216 × 90 × 117 cm. Photo: Stephen White, London. © the artist. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.



Antony Gormley, *Big Pluck 2*, 2016, (detail). Mild steel bar, 281 × 81 × 48 cm. ©Antony Gormley. Photo: Stephen White, London. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.



Antony Gormley, *Bridge*, 1985. Lead, fiberglass, plaster, and air. 191 × 50 × 35 cm. © Antony Gormley. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.



Antony Gormley, Scaffold, 2015. 4 mm square section stainless steel bar. 198 × 46 × 36 cm. © Antony Gormley. Photo: Stephen White, London. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.



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