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Loy Bell, Francesca. "Antony Gormley on The Great Big Art Exhibition - your chance to be part of the biggest show in Britain." *Independent*. January 29, 2021.



The Great Big Art Exhibition hopes to be the nation's largest ever exhibition (PA)

There is a huge reservoir of untapped energy that is full of creative juice," Sir Antony Gormley tells me over the phone, his voice filled with excitement.

The sculptor and one of Britain's foremost living artists is calling from his home where he, like the rest of us, is patiently enduring the UK's latest lockdown measures. Despite this, Gormley is in high spirits. Today, he is launching a new nationwide initiative alongside some of the country's most established art-world figures and institutions, designed to provide some much-needed levity to the wintry gloom of the pandemic. "The fact that all the museums are shut is a perfect reason for us to expose our inner selves," he continues, "to our neighbours at least!"

The initiative, entitled The Great Big Art Exhibition, will invite people across the UK to make works of art to put up in their front windows, the hope being to create the nation's largest ever exhibition. While taking a leaf out of last year's NHS rainbow initiative, Gormley explains how "this is really about diversity and the extraordinary range of both minds and imaginations that we've got in this wonderful set of islands."

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Presented by Colchester-based visual arts organisation Firstsite to celebrate its 10th anniversary, and supported by Plus Tate, the Exhibition will see the museums including the National Gallery, Tate, British Museum, National Portrait Gallery, V&A, National Museums Liverpool, Royal Academy of Arts, the Ashmolean in Oxford, the Courtauld and other museums and galleries across the country select works which they think will be inspiring as templates.

Leading artists — also including Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal, Anish Kapoor, Tai Shani, Jeremy Deller, David Shrigley, Sonia Boyce and Ai Weiwei — will choose a different theme each fortnight. The opening theme, chosen by Gormley, will be animals.



Artworks by (left to right) Iggy, Romey and Louie, which will be displayed in the front window of a house in Acton

“I expect people may actually invent animals that perhaps haven’t evolved in the natural course of Darwinian evolution, but need to evolve in order to express what is happening inside people,” he says of his choice. Far from his criteria being dogmatic (for want of a better word), Gormley is expecting “dragons, some fantastical animals with multiple legs – as many pseudopodia as are necessary to express an inner vitality. I’m asking people to evoke their spirit animal.”

It is clear that Gormley sees The Great Big Art Exhibition as a vehicle for self-expression, and he’s full of enthusiasm when I suggest that the simultaneously introspective and collective drive behind the initiative might encourage a sort of communal catharsis. “Oh I hope so!” he exclaims. “I’m hoping that every window sill or front garden or balcony will suddenly become a gallery or a plinth for these external signs of these internal conditions.”

More personally, lockdown has allowed Gormley to see his own work in a new light, something he says he will treasure in years to come.

“Normally we’re trying to cheat deadlines and get work out to galleries,” he explains. “Now it’s with us, it’s part of our daily environment. The work

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is asking us questions and wanting to be heard in a way that we haven't quite been able to work with before. It's a really positive thing."



(PA) Shalomy, 10, Benjamin, 6 and Stephanie, 8, display their artwork

Gormley hopes that the Exhibition will be a catalyst for more communal public art projects going forward. He points out that the Yorkshire Sculpture Park near Wakefield, the 500 acres of which are still open to those who live locally, has had more visitors than ever before, and suggests this is thanks to people's enhanced awareness of the world around them since we were plunged into lockdown nearly a year ago.

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The “real silver lining,” however, is the fact that people have begun to apply their inner creativity to their daily lives. “The fact is we’ve discovered bits of our own creativity that we perhaps hadn’t recognised before,” he says. “There are more people drawing, painting, making ceramics, knitting, making clothes. More people cooking, for each other and in a way that is surprising or different - doing a new recipe every day.”

He hopes that the way in which art has permeated into the everyday will emphasise its vitality, a thought that is especially poignant when set against the alarming backdrop of his industry’s deterioration over the last 12-months.

“I think absolutely that the model of art as spectacle, to which the audience is made a dumb but astonished, awestruck, passive consumer of, has to be replaced with what is happening,” he explains. “I think there has been a blossoming as a result of people having time to do things that they would normally leave to others. We have recognised that creativity exists in each and every one of us.”

The Great Big Art Exhibition runs to the end of April 2021. Visit www.firstsite.uk for details on how to take part, and creative resources to help get making and showing art everywhere