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A Conversation with

# Antony Gormley

## Being the Void

BY KARLYN DE JONGH

Antony Gormley understands the human body as a place of memory and transformation. Most of his early works are based on the process of casting his own body, which functions as subject, tool, and material. His more recent works deal with the body in abstracted or indirect ways and are concerned with the human condition. These large-scale works explore the collective body and the relationship between self and other, mediating between individual and collective, containment and extension, what can be seen and what can be sensed. Making unexpected connections across ideas and disciplines, these works have moved the domain of figural sculpture beyond the confines of the physical body to include interaction with the surrounding world, whether that be the matrix of community, space and energy, memory, or built form. Gormley's objects and installations test the limits and syntax of sculptural expression, calling for ever greater participation and engagement in the service of human freedom—a goal that he took to new heights in *One & Other*, on London's Fourth Plinth. Sean Kelly Gallery in New York is hosting a solo show of Gormley's work (March 26–May 1) to coincide with the installation of *Event Horizon* in and around Madison Square Park, March 26–August 15.

Above: *One & Other*, 2009. Fourth Plinth Commission, Trafalgar Square, London. Opposite: *Blind Light* (detail), 2007. Fluorescent light, water, ultrasonic humidifiers, toughened low-iron glass, and aluminum, installation view at Hayward Gallery, London.

**Karlyn De Jongh:** *You have stated that, in your work, you “re-invent the body from the inside, from the point of view of existence.” Would you explain?*

**Antony Gormley:** The classical image of the male sculptor is somebody who does a lot. I try to do very little. I am not acting on the world—I’m staying with it at its moment of origination. Why should I act as if this kind of determinism is the only way for sculpture to have a call on our attention? Can we start with being itself as the primary focus? Why act on a material outside my own sense of being when the material question that I face every day is embodiment?

We can leave aside the questionable notions of “I,” “me,” and “mine” and instead ask: In this dual condition of being—both material and conscious—what do I, as a conscious mind, have to deal with? It is the materiality of the body. Can I as a sculptor deal with this as my first material? I think of myself as a sculptor, working from the core condition of embodiment. I’m not making another body; I’m starting with my own, the only bit of the material world that I inhabit. To that extent, I’m working from the other side of appearance. I’m not trying to make a copy; I’m not trying to reproduce an image. The work comes as a byproduct of a moment of being taken out of the stream of duration in which all conscious beings are living.

**KDJ:** *Many of your works are casts of your own body. How do you understand the casts in relation to your own existence? Are they extensions of yourself?*

**AG:** It’s a trace. You could say that there’s desperation as a result of being uncertain about the continuity of time. But it’s also an abstraction. By continually remaking the primary condition of being, remaking the body that I didn’t choose but arrived with, the question of what that body is is multiplied into something no longer mine.

**KDJ:** *So you don’t see your sculptures as you?*

**AG:** No. But my body isn’t mine, either. It’s a temporary tenancy. So, yes, I’m in this body at the moment, but I could be out of it as much as I’m out of any of those iron ones out there. It’s a mistake to be saying “my body.” We call it “my body” like we call it “my house” or “my city”—that’s a convention, not a truth.

**KDJ:** *Is that why you incorporate the viewer, why a viewer can be the subject in your work?*

**AG:** It’s good to hear that you, as a woman, suggest it is so possible. Some women have problems with the fact that this is a penis-loaded body. My reply is that the way I’m using it has little to do with heroism or the norms of maleness. In fact, the work questions gender determinism.

**KDJ:** *If you cannot speak of “your” body but only about “a” body, does it really matter whether it is a male or a female body?*



**Full Bowl, 1977–78. Lead, 6 x 17 x 17 cm.**

**AG:** There’s a very early work that I will never sell, called *Seeing and Believing* (1988). It’s a pregnant male body, a body without breasts. There’s a hole at the navel. You could say that this work deals with the notion of indwelling—that is, the idea that the body is itself the first form of architecture, the first shelter, and that all bodies come out of other bodies, it is the material condition from which we look out or reach out through our perceptual bridges to the wider world, a receptive state.

**KDJ:** *How does your abstract notion of the body relate to physicality?*

**AG:** You need the physicality of your own body to see it, that’s the point. We could think that the work is about making singular objects, like the piece that I’m making for Lelystad, the Netherlands. But increasingly, the work is becoming a field phenomenon. It dissolves from a body defined by skin and mass into a field. Or it dissolves simply through the multiplication of elements. In both, you have to look around. If you look at this bubble matrix cloud—you have to really look around it. You need to use your own existence as the necessary register. The body that really counts is the body that has the mind in it. In the end, the viewer does the work—and it may be more than Duchamp’s 50 percent.

**KDJ:** *You have described your work with the concept of “space,” and you just mentioned the body as a first form of architecture. What do these concepts mean? How would you explain space and architecture in relation to body?*

**AG:** This is such a big question. Take, for instance, the Newton/Leibniz debate about space as the container of all things, an almost God-like conditionality. Leibniz suggests that this space is not a basis, but simply the relation between objects. We don’t need to think about the ultimate conditionality, but infinity is the thing that gives sculpture its authority. The position of an object or group of objects has a relation not only with all other objects, terrestrial and celestial, but with everything that lies beyond the perceptual horizon.

I think the biggest challenge that I’ve faced for the whole of my working practice is how you reconcile imaginative space grounded in the body with space at large. In very simple, early works, like *Full Bowl* (1977–78), there’s a void in the core. You get a sense of indeterminacy with the edge of this mass of bowls that could go on forever. It suggests that there’s a relationship between an intimate and an extending void.

The same is true of the relationship between the space that we enter when we close our eyes and space at large. If I close my eyes when I am awake and ask the question, “Where am I now?” I am somewhere, but the world as a visual object is not here. The space of consciousness is contained in a physical space, and these two spaces somehow have to be reconciled. The latest attempt that I’ve made to reconcile them is *Blind Light* (2007), where you get the same sensation but within light. If you went outside in the garden and closed your eyes in the middle of a starless night, you would be in a darkness

*Sense*, 1991. Concrete, 74.5 x 62.5 x 60 cm.

inside a darkness. If you worked on it, it could be brought into some harmonic relationship. With *Blind Light*, you walk across a threshold into a room with 7,000 lumens of bright daylight where you can't see anything. You can't even see your hands or your feet. You're awake, you're conscious, you're in space, but the space no longer has any coordinates. This is the closest I've come to a physical reconciliation of these two spatial realities.

**KDJ:** *You have mentioned your work as being ahistorical, but you also say that time is actively present. How do these aspects go together?*

**AG:** I mean that I'm not a painter of daily life. I'm not an artist who wants to reflect this time in a mirroring manner. I'm very interested in time, but I don't want my work to derive its value from where it sits in some historical continuum. I would like the work to be useable as an instrument now and in the future. In a way, I'm trying to make an astrolabe that will function for as long as consciousness is around. I'm not interested in making an instrument will be obsolete in five years because someone has invented a new chip. And I am not interested in making pictures of now, but in engaging your now.

I'm intensely interested in history as a resource for a future that we might imagine. But that doesn't mean that I want to refer to it directly. It's very important that I'm familiar with it. We live in a time of the present-ness of history like no other. In a way, this puts a certain burden on us to make things that have a dialogue with the depth of history. I'm basically telling you that I'm never going to be a fashionable artist—and I feel very lucky.

**KDJ:** *You have said that art should have a residue of art history but be approachable for someone whose visual world is articulated by mass media. How do your works reflect on both these worlds? Do they demonstrate a truth about contemporary existence?*

**AG:** I don't have to do anything about it: to bear witness you have only to acknowledge your condition. I'm living now, and the tools that I use—and I use them all—are physically and mentally different from the tools that my parents used or that my chil-



dren will use. Every room in my studio has a computer. We're inventing in software that allows me to use digital technology at its most advanced. Even though it's taken us four years, the work that I'm making for Holland represents the very forefront of what's possible in engineering terms. In all of these ways, I am absolutely of my time.

**KDJ:** *How is the question of the body's belonging related to the locations where you present your work? How important is location and the history of a location for you?*

**AG:** I try to start with the place. A body comes into it even if the body isn't figured. Take, for instance, *Another Place* (1997), the 100 figures on the beach. It's interesting that even though this work has now found a permanent site on the banks of the Mersey outside Liverpool, it absolutely came out of the Wattenmeer. I wouldn't have made it without that extraordinary place: the mouth of the River Elbe where the tide comes in over seven kilometers. The quality of light and the way that the sky is reflected in the earth convey a feeling of being at the edge and, at the same time, of being in the "now." It is not sublime and romantic in the traditional sense because big container ships continually cross the horizon, the same as at Crosby Beach.

I'm always juggling the moving place of embodiment and a particular place. There may be anxiety about the displacement of art from the structures of higher values. Some consider it a loss, but I think of it as freedom. We no longer need the frames, the plinth, the institution. Isn't that the most wonderful thing, to make something that can simply be? Whether it stands or lies or sits or falls, it's just a thing that exists and endures in space and time, in darkness and in light, in rain and in shine: a thing in the world, really in the world. It needs no excuse; it needs no mediation; it needs no protection. For me, to be given a place is an amazing thing. If somebody says, "Here is a room, here is a field, here is



Above: *European Field*, 1993. Terra cotta, 40,000 elements, 8–26 cm. high each. Below: *Another Place*, 1997. Cast iron, 100 elements, 189 x 53 x 29 cm. each.

a mountain, here is a city, make something for it," my heart leaps.

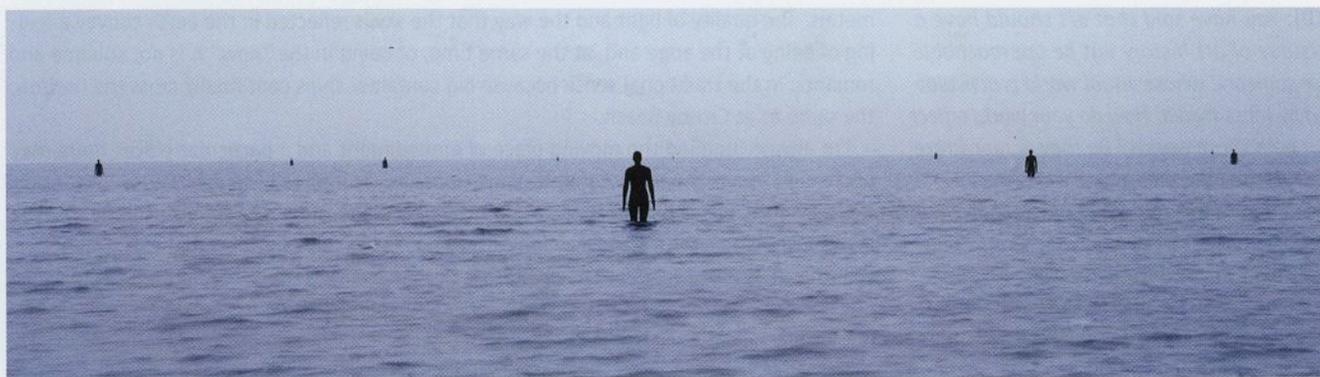
**KDJ:** *This spring and summer, Event Horizon will be exhibited at New York's Madison Square Park. Thirty-one life-size casts of your body will be placed on pathways and sidewalks, as well as on rooftops in the Flatiron District. Will people be able to see the rooftop sculptures?*

**AG:** *Event Horizon* is a scopic field. The density and height of the buildings in Manhattan intensify the tension between the

palpable, the perceivable, and the imaginable. We are positioning the sculptures as close to the edge of the buildings as possible. The work will enter into and out of visibility, and that is the point. The field of the installation should have no defined edges, and the ambition is to play with the very particular topology of Manhattan, making people more visually aware of their own environment, and indeed the edge of it, above their heads. What matters is the way in which the sculptures infect the collective space of the city. The work's subject is New York, its inhabitants, and how their perception of their environment changes as a result of these foreign bodies. It's about the searching gaze, the idea of looking and seeking, and in the process, re-assessing your own position in the world. The occupants of the buildings around Madison Square will be aware of these liminal positions as they look from their windows.

**KDJ:** *Event Horizon has already appeared in London and in Rotterdam. How do different locations affect the work?*

**AG:** It treats both the context and the body as a test site, interrogating the unconsidered nature of collective space. In every installation of *Event Horizon*, the nature of that space is different, and the subjective reaction of the inhabitants of that infection is different.





By being a vertical animal, with the cerebral cortex as the highest point in the body, the human being has separated itself from most of the biosphere. That verticality is very much part of this work. It's still asking the same question: Where does the human body belong, now that we have separated ourselves in terms of specification from those other, more enmeshed, animals? This pertains to our eco-niche as much as it does to our body-type. The human body is now detached and in some senses might belong more to space than to the earth.

**KDJ:** *You have described the body as a place of memory and transformation. In *One & Other*, the transformation of the body seems literal—the body changes every hour. Or do you understand “transformation” in a different way?*

**AG:** This was an exercise in self-representation, as well as in interrogating the status of the statue. Art is being replaced by life. But it also has to endure, in time and in the elements, so it was very important that it be a completely uninterrupted occupation of the plinth for the 100 days. The idea of this was a slow frame change that nevertheless maintained a continuity. We started with the individual person and ended up with some idea of the collective body. Every person who contributed to the time-line of representations changed it.

**KDJ:** *How do you see this living sculpture in reference to your other work?*

**AG:** All of my work demands a certain kind of projection. You could ask: How do we project our lives into the silence and stasis of sculpture? How do we use it as a focus for the things that we have and it lacks (freedom of movement, thought, and feeling)? In a sense that's exactly what *One & Other* became—an isolated and idealized space of public sculpture becoming the place of personal projection.

**KDJ:** *Is your love for “edge” locations related to their circumstances, natural or otherwise?*

**AG:** A space outside is at the top of my list of sites. To allow an object to be without shelter, to make something that shares the condition of a tree or a mountain, is a great inspiration. The condition of a museum takes the object out of its context, out of where it's working, where it has a life, and puts it where it can be read. And the function of the museum is to catalogue and conserve objects that have ceased to have a life. If the museum, and the ability of objects to be categorized and read, becomes the matrix by which things are given value, we have lost our faith in the potential of art to affect life and in the idea that human beings can have some part in evolution.

This is what worries me about the human project at the moment. We are so involved in our ability to turn the object into a symbol that we no longer live directly. The power of art to break through the symbolic order, the inexorable process of things becoming words, is its most critical function. I believe that dumb objects can catalyze our lives and allow us to sense existence more intensely.

**KDJ:** *Does your work confront an awareness of being, of existing?*

*Event Horizon, 2007. Cast iron, installation view.*

**AG:** I think so: “That thing exists; therefore, so do I.” The only excuse for my sculpture to exist is that it reinforces the existence of the receiver. I would say that the work is empty: it has little symbolic function, no narrative function. Its only power is, in a sense, what it makes the subject reflect or project. And the subject is always in the viewer. These things work on place as a form of acupuncture. They are simply a way of making place count. What's already there is the thing that matters. I think that they are a reversal of the old obsession with figures and grounds; these repeated body forms are essentially void grounds, the place where somebody once was, and anybody could be. The work inverts the figure-ground relationship: the ground becomes the figure, and the figure becomes place or space, a void space where the viewer by implication could be one with himself.

I think of art as always being a communication with that which has not happened, a communication with those we will never meet—and maybe even not with human beings. Some of the most beautiful things that human beings have ever made are not about communication between us but about a need to communicate something that is in a way unconceivable, impalpable, ineffable, and incommensurable—that lies on the other side of our perceptual horizon.

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