

SEANKELLY

Jobling, Billy. "Sculpture is a catalyst for a re-engagement with the elements and matter," *MutualArt*, September 27, 2017.



‘Sculpture is a catalyst for a re-engagement with the elements and matter’



Poised to take flight, yet anchored to earth by its leaden form — that’s the paradox at the heart of Sir Antony Gormley’s landmark sculpture, *A Case for an Angel I* (1989). The life-size figure, cast from the artist’s own body, boasts an 8.5-metre wingspan. In 2008 it filled the front hall of the British Museum as part of its sculpture exhibition, *Statuephilia*. It was also a precursor to probably Gormley’s most famous work, *Angel of the North*, the vast Cor-Ten steel figure that towers over Gateshead in northeast England.

A Case for an Angel I comes to auction on 6 October in the *Post-War & Contemporary Art Evening Auction* at Christie’s London. Here, Gormley reveals his inspiration for the work, its relationship with *Angel of the North*, and why it remains so special to him.

BJ: Your call for a return to the body in an age of diffused and displaced experience seems more relevant now than ever. How does it feel to look at *A Case for an Angel* nearly 30 years on?

Antony Gormley: ‘The central thrust of my work remains the same: to try to make objects that are reflective instruments. I believe that sculpture can provide a catalyst for first-hand experience and that representation has to be replaced with reflexivity. At a time when more and more of us are sedentary and increasingly relate to the world through meta image, I want to refocus on first-hand experience. I think sculpture is a catalyst for a re-engagement with the elements and matter.’

BJ: *A Case for an Angel* seems to suggest both containment and vindication. Could you talk about the choice of title?

AG: ‘The work is a box for a thing, and it is putting a case forward for imagination over pragmatism. It could be argued that as no one has ever seen an angel, it is necessary to continue to imagine them.’

'As a child, I was always conscious of having a guardian angel. I have evolved away from this childish, magical thinking but nevertheless wish to acknowledge the power and positive effect of believing ourselves protected.

'The work acts as a sounding board for the presence of the viewer. We all exist within the bounding condition of a body which contains a mind that can transcend the limits of the body.

'The tools of modernity have allowed us to transcend the limitations of terrestrial existence: to see people who are not present and escape gravity to experience the all-seeing aerial perspective. These are faculties that we would have considered divine only a century and a half ago. This god-like technology has resulted in an atrophy of the imagination.

'The work can also be seen as a meditation on our relationship with this technology that has extended the capability of the body, but at the same time transformed it. Paul Virilio's phrase "maximum velocity, minimum mobility" springs to mind: in escaping our atmosphere and fulfilling the full promise of aviation an astronaut has to be strapped in, immobile. In gaining capability we may have lost agency. In making the possibility of flight real, we may have lost the ability to imagine it.

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'These paradoxes, inherent in the extension of mind through technology, are expressed in my work by the absolute, static nature of the sculpture and the way that it forms a barrier to movement. The top of the wings of *A Case for an Angel I* describe a perfect horizon, and it could be that the work offers us an opportunity to sense our own intrinsic ability to reach beyond the physical limits of the horizon, imaginatively.

'The surface of the work is divided by only two seams that form a cross. A vertical seam divides the body into two halves, reinforcing the human body's bilateral symmetry: we have two arms, two legs, two nostrils, two lungs, two sides of the heart, two kidneys, two ovaries or testicles, and this bilateral symmetry is replicated in the two sides of a brain.

'In its form and structure, the angel suggests the necessity of balance and hopefully provides an instrument which could be used to achieve it. The inherent cruciform in the angel exists already within the body, in the relationship between sexuality and consciousness or the brain and the genitals and the ability of the arms to reach out to embrace the wider world. The cross was in the body long before any body was nailed to one.

'The reflexive nature of the work demands that it is seen on the same plane as the viewer, that it confronts the experience of present space-time and invites a hiatus or a stop. It is critical that the work is literally grounded. On a plinth, the work becomes symbolic and denies its primary haptic body-mirror function, as well as denying its ability to be a visual blockage. It is important that the wings act as an impediment at eye level. The reflexive potential of the work can act only by denying continuance of passage.

'The work is normally exhibited at the centre of a space, halfway down an empty gallery, where the viewer must duck down to get past or simply be stopped.'

BJ: The image of flight as spiritual aspiration in your work first appears in *Vehicle*, 1987, before being developed in the 'Case for an Angel' series. How did you arrive at this point, and how did you see the work in relation to your wider practice?

AG: 'The work comes out of a series of extended body forms that starts with *Tree* (1984) and *Field* (1984-85) and continues with *Home and the World* (1986-87) and *Home and the World II* (1986-96). The first *Home and the World* is a body-case with an extended tongue and the second is a walking lead body-case with a six-metre longhouse as a replacement for a head.

'The work is both an evocation of the experience of mindfulness and hopefully an instrument that encourages it'

These works could be said to deal with the mind/body problem; trying to find an objective correlative for the tension between the potential of consciousness's infinite extension versus the limitations of bodily containment.'

BJ: What was the journey between *A Case for an Angel I* and the *Angel of the North*?

AG: 'When I was commissioned to make the *Angel of the North*, the challenge was to take an image that was derived from a very intimate personal practice and the technique of hand-beating metal and translate those into the forms of industrial production. This was necessary in order to make a work of a sufficient scale to command the open and exposed site of the Lower Team Valley outside Gateshead. The *Angel of the North* uses the language of steel engineering — of bridges and ships — to make an image relevant to a community devastated by the end of the relationship between coal and engineering that created the industrial revolution.'

BJ: The 1990s heralded an increasing focus on the body in contemporary art. How do you see *A Case for an Angel I* in the context of what was going on around you at that time?

AG: 'While being fascinated by shows like Jeffrey Deitch's *Post Human*, I was very aware of the representational nature of much of the figure work of the 1990s. I have never been interested in identity politics or narrative sculpture. I am interested in the body more as a space than an object and its potential as a site for transformation. I have never wanted to make pictures or tell stories. I am interested in the abstract body, not in putting the body to work in a culture that is already obsessed with body image.

'I regard sculpture as a reinforcement of embodied experience, not as an escape from it. As such, most of the representational work of my peers does not interest me. I have at times felt close to the work of Mirosław Balka, although his work is more concerned with memory and so is less relevant to me than the examples of Richard Serra and Walter De Maria, who both allow sculpture to be a place of first-hand experience.'

BJ: Although you have described your work as 'a-religious', *A Case for an Angel I* echoes the Christian iconography which was a key part of your upbringing. As an image of the abstract self, does it also learn from your later practice of Buddhist meditation?

AG: 'The work is both an evocation of the experience of mindfulness and hopefully an instrument that encourages it. I used (and continue to use) lead for practical reasons, but also because of its associations with alchemy and the state of 'nigredo', the necessary liminal condition in the transformation of matter from putrefaction to sublimation. Lead's properties of absorbing as well as reflecting light, causing psychotropic effect, insulating against all radiation and being an absolute barrier, are all significant in its function within the piece as a transformer of proprioceptive embodiment to greater spatial awareness and mental extension.'