

SEANKELLY

Vogel, Carol. "Interlopers on the Skyline," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2010.

The New York Times

Interlopers on the Skyline



Todd Heisler/The New York Times

SITTING in his studio here, a converted warehouse north of King's Cross, on a recent chilly morning, the artist Antony Gormley was talking about the sensation he was hoping to cause with "Event Horizon," his first public art project in New York. It had been conceived as a shocker: from next Friday through Aug. 15, 31 naked men — or rather 31 slightly different sculptures of the same naked man, Mr. Gormley himself — will be perched on rooftops, standing on the grounds of Madison Square Park and dotting the sidewalks around the Flatiron district.

"When I did it in London" — in 2007 these same figures could be found on bridges, buildings and streets along the South Bank of the Thames River — "the reaction was quite remarkable," he said. "People would stop. They would notice one; they would immediately stop somebody else on the street, pointing to the thing. Then gatherings of people would result, and quite quickly they would register their environment in a way they hadn't before."

In New York the project, not yet fully installed, has already caused a stir, but one Mr. Gormley could hardly have anticipated. Last week the New York City Police Department pre-emptively reassured the public that the figures were not potential jumpers on the verge of committing suicide. According to news reports the police had not received any emergency calls but promised to respond even if the location corresponded to an "Event Horizon" figure. Still, for some, the project recalled memories of victims of 9/11 leaping to their deaths.

"I understand the police are just doing their job," Mr. Gormley said in a follow-up interview by phone. "I never wanted to freak anyone out. If people think of death and suicide, it's a sad reflection on evolution. This is meant to be an amazing celebration of New York."

As far as Mr. Gormley is concerned, the project is also a way to get viewers thinking about the environment around them. Back in his studio he explained further: "You could almost say the insertion of the sculpture is like the insertion of acupuncture needles within a collective body. And seeing how the body as a whole reacts to the presence of this irritation is very much the point."



Hazel Thompson for The New York Times

The 59-year-old Mr. Gormley — elegantly dressed in perfectly pressed khaki pants, a red-check scarf tied neatly around his neck and wire-rimmed glasses resting precariously on his nose — is a smooth talker. He describes "Event Horizon" with such assurance he could almost be mistaken for an overanxious dealer trying to make a sale.

Yet he gets his inspiration from ancient sculpture from India as well as modernist masters like Joseph Beuys. After studying archaeology, anthropology and art history at Cambridge University, Mr. Gormley went on to learn about Buddhist meditation in India and Sri Lanka.

Although in New York he is not a household name, in London he is a celebrity. While his detractors have called his work vulgar and bland, others have hailed him as the next Henry Moore and a "father figure" to a younger generation of sculptors who also deal with the body. Mr. Gormley is married to Vicken Parsons, a painter.

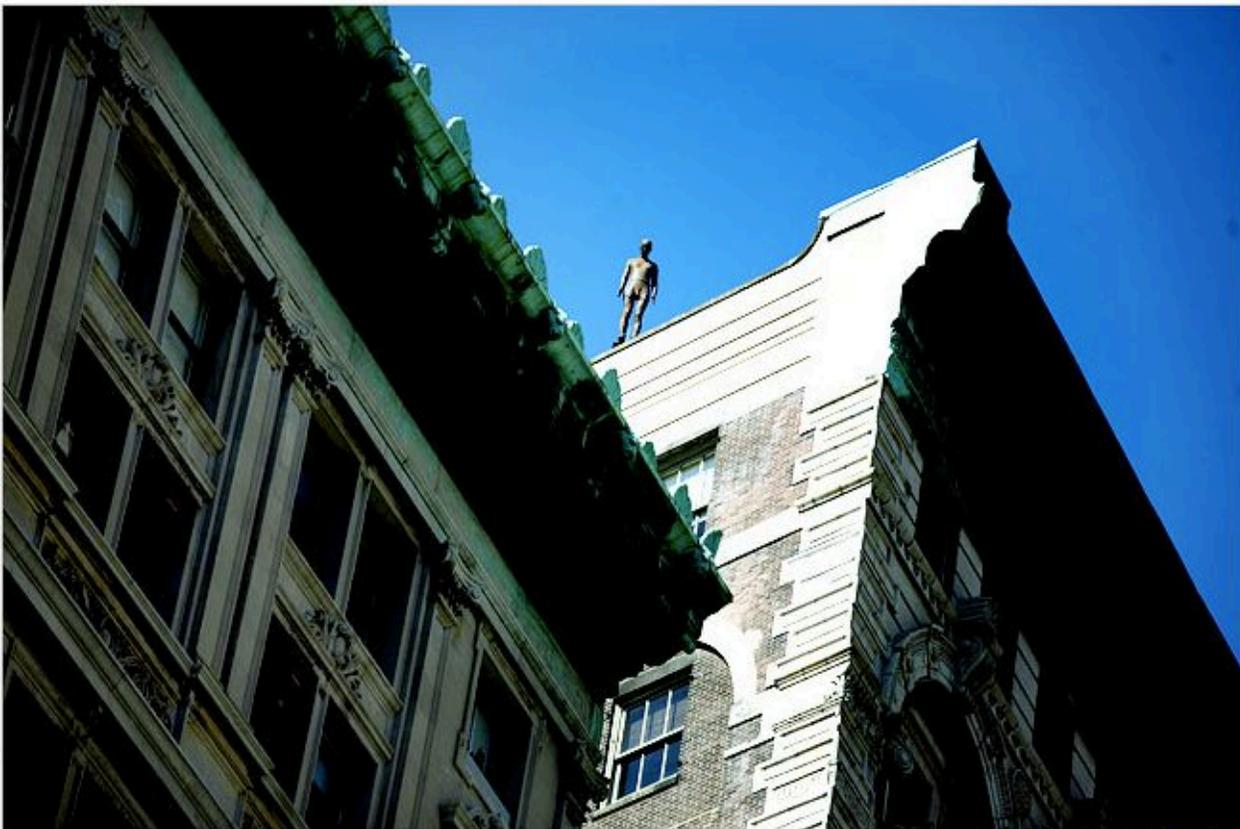
He won the Turner Prize in 1994 for "Field for the British Isles," an installation of 40,000 hand-size clay figures, each with upturned eyes, that was seen at the Tate Liverpool, among other institutions. He also received much attention last summer when he arranged for members of the public each to have an hour of fame atop the Fourth Plinth, a granite slab in Trafalgar Square. The project went around the clock for

100 days and caused a continuous traffic jam as pedestrians and drivers stopped to gawk at the spectacle. At the time some critics dismissed it, calling the project Facebook art or reality-TV art.

“The plinth was the cumulative effect of seeing the everyday elevated or in a new frame,” Mr. Gormley said. “I think ‘Event Horizon’ is rather different. It is the sense of discovering the same body in very different circumstances, so it is less about the subject and more about the content.”

He added: “It has to do with questioning both the status of art and the nature of our built environment. In a time of rising environmental awareness it asks the question: ‘Where does the human being fit into the scheme of things?’ ”

The installation represents the first time that the Madison Square Park Conservancy will present work that spills beyond the park — between Madison and Fifth Avenues from 23rd to 26th Streets — and into the neighborhood. Debbie Landau, president of the nonprofit conservancy, said she had raised the \$400,000 in production costs through corporations, foundations and individuals.



Todd Heisler/The New York Times

In the mid-'80s, Ms. Landau said, she tried unsuccessfully to organize “The Manhattan Project,” a work Mr. Gormley had conceived involving more than 100 sculptural bodies placed from Harlem to Lower Manhattan. There wasn't a year that went by when she didn't contact Mr. Gormley's studio. Then in 2007 she saw “Event Horizon” in London and was determined to bring it to New York. “It's a terribly powerful installation,” she said.

Each sculpture stands more than 6 feet 2 inches tall, some cast in iron, others in fiberglass. The figures have not been rescaled from the installation in London, even though it's not a city of skyscrapers as New York is. The difference is of no matter to Mr. Gormley. “Whether you're looking at a body or a satellite dish, it almost becomes a game,” he said.

When asked why he uses himself and not a model, Mr. Gormley replied: “It seems silly to use other bodies when I have one of my own. I can do things I could never ask other people to do primarily because it would be difficult to communicate what I wanted.”

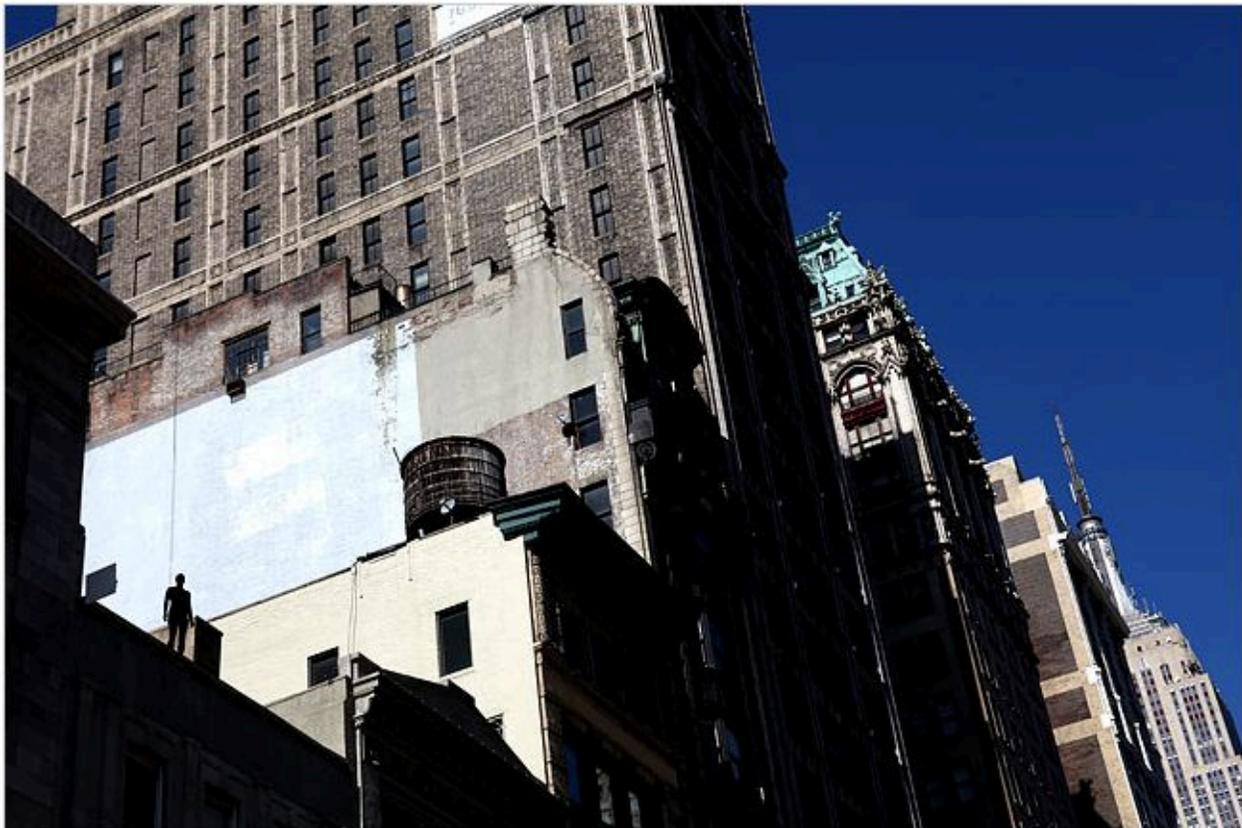
The process is neither easy nor comfortable. “I’m wrapped in cling film” — the British phrase for plastic wrap — “and I just stand there for an hour or two covered in wet plaster,” Mr. Gormley explained. “At the beginning it’s an act of will, willing yourself not to move or scratch or fiddle. Then it’s an act of endurance. And finally I’m cut out with saws, actually hacksaw blades that come from America.”

When Mr. Gormley came to New York last summer to scout locations, Ms. Landau said, “we really focused on historic buildings.” She added, “We not only wanted viewers to look at the architecture but at the horizon line too.”

That’s when they started casting an eye farther afield. “The Empire State Building will be the exclamation point of the show,” she said. “That sculpture is on the 26th floor on the northeast side, set literally on the edge of the parapet.”

In the end Mr. Gormley decided to place 4 sculptures on the ground (around the park and in the Flatiron pedestrian triangle) and 27 on rooftops and ledges. (The ones on rooftops are fiberglass, weighing about 70 pounds each; the ones on the ground are cast-iron and are about 1,400 pounds.) There will be naked men as high as 57 stories up and on landmarks like the New York Life Insurance Building, the former Metropolitan Life Tower and the Flatiron Building.

“The viewer in some sense becomes the viewed,” Mr. Gormley explained. “Like a statue, they become static sculptures themselves looking up.”



Todd Heisler/The New York Times