

SEAN KELLY

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Antony Gormley on the role of architecture in his new work



Antony Gormley in his North London studio © Greg Funnell

"We're dealing with a made world," Antony Gormley tells me, "rather than an elemental one, and I've set myself the task of trying to make an account of what it feels like to live now."

It's a big ambition — the expression of the contemporary urban condition. We're sitting in Gormley's lofty and light King's Cross studio, an interior on an industrial scale, a place of making, of welding, casting, cutting and drilling, our conversation just audibly peppered with the faint clanking of lifting gear and the shrill buzz of mechanical cutting in the adjacent workshop. It is a place where Gormley directs the making of steel armatures, cages, casts and cubes, most referring to his own body, shrinking, enlarging, hollowing out and abstracting his very recognisable tall, lean form. So for his idea of highlighting what he calls mankind's "profound shift" from a natural world to the man-made landscape of cities (as he refers to more than half the world now living in cities), of hybridising body and sculpture, art and artifice, the organic and the constructed, this neo-industrial space seems a perfect setting.

In fact the world immediately beyond Gormley's automatic steel gate, a landscape of cranes and construction, where the same mechanical noises echo around the streets, is an exemplar of exactly what he is talking about. Once the industrial and railway backlands of the city, King's Cross is now a massive experiment in the monetisation of a post-industrial, post-public-ownership wasteland. It is also one that asks urgent questions about public space, housing, ownership and what, if anything, is left in this new corporate landscape for the city's inhabitants to improvise with, to make them feel at home. "What participation can there be," Gormley asks, urgently, leaning in towards me, "in this new collective body of the city?"

It's back to the body metaphor. From the "Angel of the North" to "Field for the British Isles", virtually Gormley's entire oeuvre has been defined by an exploration of the body (his body) in space, as part of

a mass or with its own mass being broken down into a minimal armature so that it becomes something ethereal. “All that is solid”, as Marx and Engels wrote, “melts into air”. And just as the two German émigrés were writing their Communist Manifesto, a couple of miles from where we’re sitting, they were studying the condition of the contemporary city — a place in flux that was defining a new situation for mankind, a city of uncertainty and upheaval. That same city outside Gormley’s door is metamorphosing again.

“What are our real values?” Gormley asks me, rhetorically, “and how are they exposed in what we create? Don’t we have to resist pure monetary values in favour of the higher value of the quality of life? Ruskin was right — ‘There is no wealth but life’.”

Gormley is addressing these issues, in his own, characteristic, thoughtful, if slightly oblique manner, in a work that will form the centrepiece of a new show at Bermondsey’s vast White Cube Gallery. “Sleeping Field” is a landscape formed by a cluster of nearly 600 sculptures, each based on a human form abstracted into blocks like primitive industrial pixels, laid out in a landscape resembling a rather anarchic city plan. Figures morph into architecture, bodies into entire urban blocks.

“I see it as trying to say something about the change in the urban which has crept up on us. We’ve been asleep — this is our collective body. Why have we accepted this condition of being aliens in this bigger body? While we’ve been sleeping someone stole our personas and they’ve moulded [the city] in a way that’s not about wellbeing but about economic benefit.”

It’s an Invasion of the Bodysnatchers analogy, a brutal portrayal of a rapacious city consuming its own population. And the artwork will be inaccessible, glimpsed through slots in walls, an analogy for the alienation from the city.

Gormley himself benefited from what was once a more forgiving London. Born into the gentle greenery of Hampstead Garden Suburb he ended up (after travelling to India in the early 1970s) a couple of miles south in the then almost abandoned wastelands of King’s Cross. “I was able to squat in a whole bloody factory in the King’s Cross Road,” Gormley says. “It was teeming with artists and there was real life on the streets.”

“There was this feeling of coming over the viaduct here, with this black brick wall with black granite copings and this huge open sky above — it was like a James Turrell!”

That expanse of sky is now being eroded by tall buildings. “York Road has become a canyon,” Gormley says, referring to the road outside his studio, “These priapic towers signal a new world order that has no interest in culture at all. Mary [Shelley’s] Frankenstein’s monster is now a system that one can’t control — growth for its own sake.”

Gormley is genuinely angry, at least in his rather English polite and thoughtful way. Frustrated by a corporate takeover of the city. “Affordable housing seems to be the only condition. But why isn’t there a requirement for cultural provision to be made the developer’s responsibility? A dance studio, a music venue, studio space. Why has London just accepted that artists will have to move to Dagenham, or wherever. If we call King’s Cross a ‘creative quarter’ and that creativity is one of Britain’s identities, then isn’t there a need to integrate it? We need to call these late capitalist, corporate values to account. They’re playing Monopoly with London.”

The artist is aware of his own luck: the long free squats in an era when central London was loose and accommodating to art, the good fortune of having been born into a generation that could afford their own homes and the success that allowed him to commission architect David Chipperfield (who used himself to have his office on the other side of the railway lands in Camden) to design a huge studio. But he also sees the city through the eyes of a younger generation. “I am my [grown-up] children’s student,” he says. “They see what’s happening to the city and they despise it.”

We return to chatting about the context, York Road, Central Saint Martins, the radical transformation of the city outside. “There is no such thing as Terra Nullius,” Gormley says, referring to the blank slate conditions, which is how developers so often treat their sites. “The site is its history, its present

population and you have to attend to that. This whole show is a materialisation of my anxieties about the forces that are forming — and deforming — this city that is where I was born and where I live.”

For a while it seemed that Gormley was moving towards architecture himself. His plan for the London Olympics site featured a huge body as building, a 24-storey figure with lots of stairs while his crouching figure sculpture jutting out of the front of London’s Beaumont Hotel (“Room”) contains an actual hotel bedroom. But in this show he has returned to the body and its relationship with buildings, a more tangential but perhaps more urgent inquiry. There are bodies upended and laid horizontal to resemble skyscrapers or collapsed buildings, another a long tunnel based on an extrusion of his own body form, “so you move down it like a piston”, he explains, towards the darkness at its sealed end. “It’s a test site in which the reflexive replaces the representational,” the artist says. “Stability and instability, the pieces of a puzzle.

“I’m hoping what it will do is to make everyone who comes to this show more aware of how light, volume and space affect them emotionally.”

This is a show about the body, and about bodies. But more than any of Gormley’s previous exhibitions, it is about the collective body, about responding to the city and about responsibility for the city. “Our primary condition is the physical body,” he says, “and the secondary condition is the world that we have built with our bodies — which then goes on to build us.”

‘Fit’, White Cube Bermondsey, London, September 30-November 6. whitecube.com



‘Sleeping Field’ (2016) by Antony Gormley



Antony Gormley’s ‘Model’ (2012) © Alamy



'Room' (2014)