

# SEANKELLY

Morrell, Lara. "Antony Gormley is the Sergeant of Sentinels." *My Art Guides*.  
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## My Art Guides

Born and bred in London, Antony Gormley is the best-known British sculptor working today. His 'sentinels' appear all over the world, investigating the relationship of the human body to space. We spoke to the artist about London today, our cyber-society and his show, currently on at the Royal Academy of Arts.

**Lara Morrell:** As a born Londoner how have you identified and developed a relationship with the city and how does this materialise in your work?

**Antony Gormley:** When Vicken and I first married we lived in Peckham for 10 years, built a studio there and had all our children there. Then for school reasons we moved back north. For 14 years I crossed the Thames over Waterloo Bridge or Blackfriars Bridge twice a day on my way from Camden Town to my studio in Peckham, what a way to connect to the river and London's ever-changing skyline. In 2007, I made *EVENT HORIZON* on that same skyline around the same two bridges as a meditation on the city. Now the studio is back in King's Cross where I started. I love this city. For all its difficulties, it is comfortable, friendly, diverse and seemingly ever-welcoming to each new wave of people that arrives here. In 2009, I made *ONE & OTHER* for London's Fourth Plinth, with 2,400 participants from all over the country celebrating our diversity and openness.

**Lara Morrell:** Your early years were spent squatting in Kings Cross, the face of which has had a dramatic overhaul in recent years (as well the affordability of the area). Do these drastic changes and forces in the urban and social landscape of London bother you?



*Photograph by Stephen White, London*

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**Antony Gormley:** London has put itself up for sale. We have had a sequence of real estate bids for the heart of London. The commodification of property can knock out feelings of community and neighbourhood, and of course that worries me. Mass tourism also worries me. This is not a London-specific problem but a bigger, global problem – that we are all eagerly travelling to and looking at other people's places rather than living in our own.



**Lara Morrell:** The brand new purpose-built Central Saint Martin's building situated in Kings Cross in the Granary building designed by Stanton Williams (where I studied a few years back), is considerably different to the content, context and overall feel of the CSM you attended. How do you think art education in the UK has evolved since your days as an art student? What are your thoughts on the accessibility/affordability of art education in the UK today?

**Antony Gormley:** Art schools seem to have been taken over by middle management and that's a real tragedy. Back in the 1970s, it was normal that artists making their name nationally and internationally gained a kind of life-support from teaching. This made art school very exciting because you were in direct contact with a wide range of very different sensibilities – artists out there making shows, changing the artistic landscape, were talking to you about their work and about your work. Now that just isn't true. On the whole, when I was at art school, students were often people who weren't going to fit ordinary career paths and were interested in



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a wide range of things. It seems like we are now so dependent on a large proportion of the student intake coming from abroad, paying top tier fees. The system has become completely addicted to and reliant on that cash flow. I think that this shift has resulted in a dilution of an inheritance from the post-war years, the legacy of Maynard Keynes and Albertopolis: the belief that a rich society had to have a making/thinking relationship and that the crafts and the arts should be supported in the centre of our cities by serious institutions giving the widest possible education to the widest variety of people. Art schools are very different places and I regret that the tradition of international and national artists teaching in art schools has not survived.



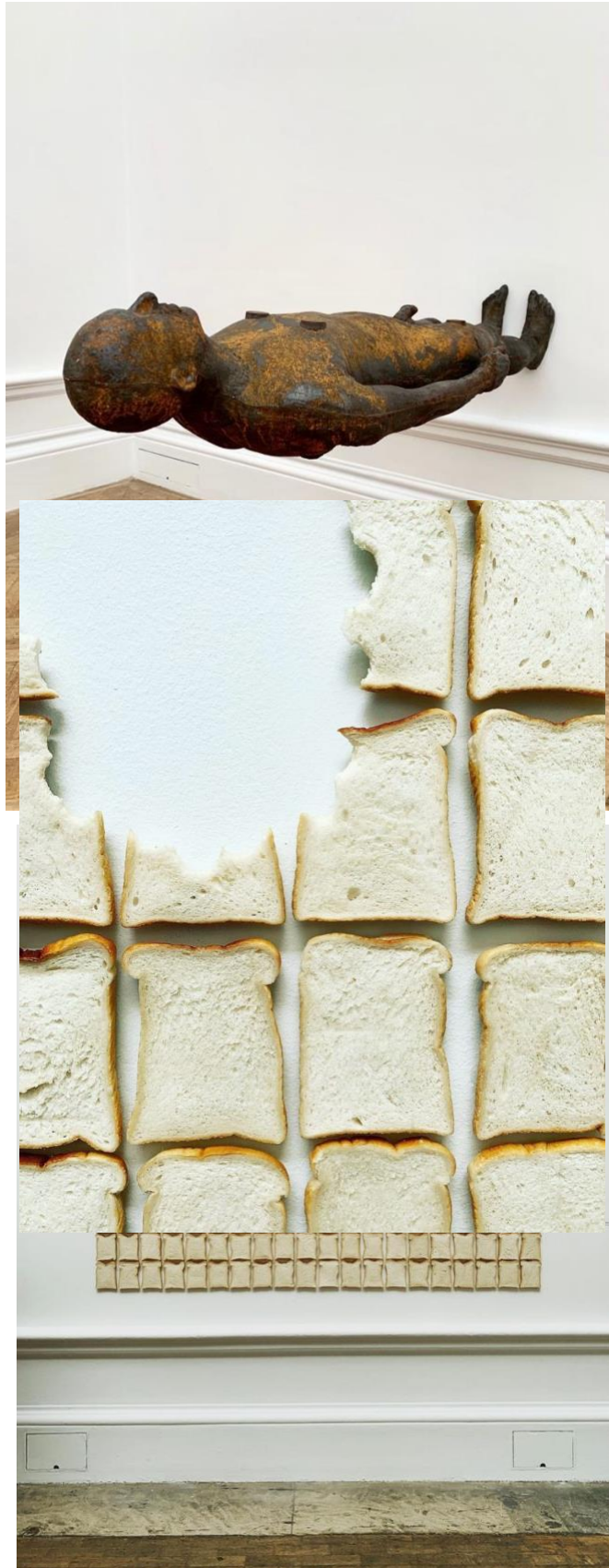
**Lara Morrell:** Your sculptures often outline alienated and solitary figures dwelling upon the abyss before them. How do you view the average London city dweller today? As the city evolves, do you find that it is becoming a lonelier place, evermore difficult to project oneself upon?

**Antony Gormley:** Cybersociety, the way in which we are all in touch with each other through our external brain machines, has had the most devastating effect on feelings of collective community. We are addled by an overload of reported fact that we can do nothing about, but everyone is aware of this problem and is working against it through friendship. Every kind of interest group seems to be flourishing, from running and yoga to all kinds of making and growing, we are all on a journey to reformulate our society in a time of mass information. My work's singularity isn't a manifestation of alienation and loneliness: the attitude of the work is alert, aware and awake. When placed against the sky the sculptures are often looking towards a horizon that we cannot see. I think of them as sentinels, aware of a wider picture, inviting a form of awareness to do with the future, the planet, space.

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Lara Morrell: Your works are usually made and thrive in direct response to the locations in which they are installed, have you come across any challenges in grouping your works together for this retrospective at the Royal Academy? How does this re-location/de-contextualisation change the reading of the work and the way the viewer engages with it?

**Antony Gormley:** I think that every exhibition that I make is also an invitation to investigate the body of the building in which it is shown. I did that with the Hayward Gallery in 2007 and now again with the Royal Academy. The RA comes with a lot of baggage. The architecture itself is pseudo-renaissance, informed by Alberti's orders. The RA is one of seven learned societies coming out of the Enlightenment and the belief that civilised rationality was the basis of humanity's future. I do not particularly want to contradict those values but complement them with materials associated with our industrial age. Two works came into being in the Royal Academy, they came in bits and were constructed for the first time in gallery 3 and gallery 8, MATRIX and CAVE. They are conversations between shattered orthogonal structures, the grid and classical order. The thresholds of each room are an important part of this architectural dialogue. The three times lifesize doorways are



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either blocked or opened, barred or obscured and lead to light or to darkness. In gallery 8, where we enter into CAVE, there is a great marble doorway now blocked with tumbled steel boxes that offer the visitor only a small passage by which to enter the work's dark bodyform. To do so you have to bend down and I like that juxtaposition of the grandeur of renaissance magnificence with the mode of entering a traditional long house where you have to bow down in a gesture of submission.

**Lara Morrell:** You work with a wide-ranging use of organic, industrial and elemental materials, could you tell me a little about the choice of material when approaching a new sculpture – the relationship between the chosen material, the subject matter and location.

**Antony Gormley:** All matter comes with a preordained feel and connection with things that already exist, either systems, or values, or location in landscape. I want to respect matter. When I use iron, for example, I am thinking of the iron core of our planet that gives us our magnetic field and keeps us on our cosmic course. When I use bread, I think about bread as the staff of life, the agent of transformation of matter into mind. Material is already a subject in its own right, there is no need to use it to make a picture. Simply by displacing something we can develop a new relationship with it, with ourselves and with the rest of the world. I feel the same way about context. As I have said, the RA building itself becomes part of the raw material and emergent subject of the show. I have thought hard about the materials that I have brought into my exhibition at the RA. They are all familiar, they are all everyday things, they are all out of our current lives whether food, earth or industrial material.



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**Lara Morrell:** Art fairs, could perhaps be compared to the London property market, an important space where one needs to understand why people are building/making and buying, My Art Guide London is produced for the occasion of Frieze Week in London (with a focus on all that is going on simultaneously elsewhere in the city) how do you view the commodification of art?

**Antony Gormley:** I would contest the assertion that the art fair is an important space of understanding! You make an intriguing comparison with the London property market, a system of exchange through which the basic human need for shelter is transformed into something like style choice. Art has fallen into this commodification trap without fully recognising the consequences. There's no doubt that art fairs allow artists an important opportunity to support their work, but I wish we could somehow use the net to exchange product, time and skill directly, without markets. For the moment we live in a world that is ruled by a late capitalism which cannot cure its own evils. Art fairs often undermine the integrity of the art they seek to support.



**Lara Morrell:** Could you disclose to our readers, a few of your favourite, off-the-beaten track London hang outs?

**Antony Gormley:** Well, I love two Sichuan restaurants. One is called Silk Road on Camberwell Church Street and the other is Xi'an opposite Emirates Stadium. I love my local pub, The Lord Stanley, it serves fantastic food. Precious to me is Postman's Park where George Frederic Watts's memorial celebrates ordinary, unsung heroes and The Hardy Tree in St Pancras Churchyard, close to John Soane's tomb, where the young Thomas Hardy arranged tombstones within the roots of a plane tree, hiding their names one against the other. And of course, there's Hampstead Heath. What an amazing joy to find there, as I did yesterday, a heron preening itself, sitting on a floating buoy in the pond above the Men's Pond and to be able to delight in the range of trees, American Pin Oaks, low crowned Holme Oaks, fantastic, ancient sweet chestnuts.