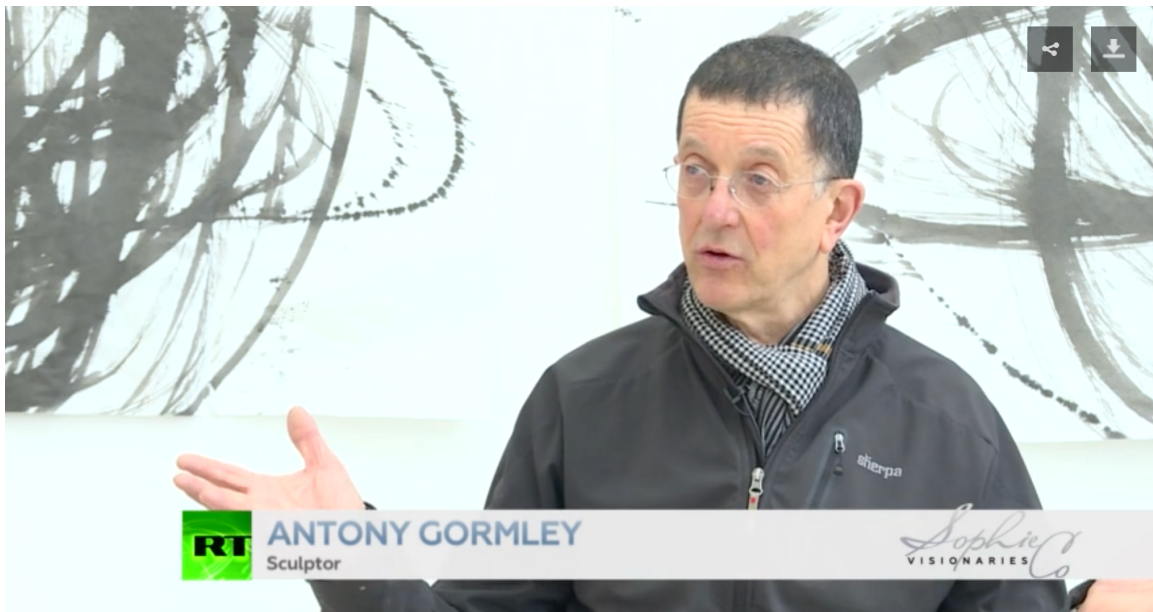


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Shevardnadze, Sophie. Visionaries: Despite godlike technologies, our goals are primitive – sculptor. *SophieCo, RT*. Podcast audio. January 14, 2022. <https://www.rt.com/shows/sophieco-visionaries/546002-antony-gormley-technologies-goals/>.



Pablo Picasso once famously said that sculpture is the art of intelligence. We talked to Sir Antony Gormley, sculptor, intellectual and philosopher.

Sophie Shevardnadze: Antony Gormley. It's great to have you on our show today.

Antony Gormley: Love to do it for you, Sophie.

SS: We always start off by saying that, you know, we're not a program that specialises in art or sculpture, we go to see big visionaries from different fields, just to pretty much talk about life. So hopefully, that's what we're going to do today.

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AG: Good. I look forward.

SS: *Okay. So when I look at what you do, you aspire to make audiences really think wide, not narrow. But then you've chosen such a personal thing – a body – to make people think about things that are really out there. Why body? Why the most personal thing in the world?*

AG: Because we all live inside one. And I just wanted to start with the only thing that I could really be certain of, which is that, yeah, I exist in a place that we call a body. And I guess there's so many illusions about the body that we call it 'my body' but, of course, it has its own agenda. It's part of a bigger system. And I think, just to start with the intimate, but also the thing that is common to all of us, we all live inside the body, we all live at the other side of appearance. And I guess, thinking about the body principally as a place rather than an object, thinking of it as a place where we arrive to consciousness and then thinking about how a body connects to light, to air, to space – I guess that's my project. And it's interesting because at art school, in a way you learn about art, and I really wanted to start from first principles, learning about life, I mean, or trying to make things that connect with life. And I think that means principally through feeling and where does feeling come from, from the body. So you could say my project is anthropological rather than aesthetic. I want to use the space of art as a test ground, asking really simple questions. What does it feel like to be alive? What is our relationship to space and to each other and to all living things? What is our relationship to time? And you could say *"All these are big philosophical questions. What are you doing, trying to make objects that relate to these questions?"* And I say, *"Well, I think that sculpture can be an objective, materialised form of scepticism asking those Socratic questions."*

SS: *We're gonna certainly talk a lot about aesthetics versus the concept and the way your works are perceived by a wide range of audiences. But before that a little bit more about the body and you because I've also always believed that, for instance, the best writer writes his masterpiece when he knows exactly what he's writing about when he's lived that story, right? And I mean, it must be the same thing for you working with the bodies, right? Except for the fact that you've cast yourself, literally cast yourself. What do you find in bodies because I know your German colleague Georg Baselitz used to say that sculpture is like archaeology, you dig and you find something. What do you find when you dig into the body?*

AG: If you think of what we admire and I admire too in Michelangelo or Bernini, it's that he manages to render into the crystalline and fixed substance of marble something of vitality, of a feeling carried by anatomy. And I guess, for me, rather than trying to illustrate vitality by an understanding of anatomy, I want to start with life itself. I don't just make bodywork but all of the bodies that I make start with a lived moment of human time, my own. And it's really a question of life, in a way, accepting the condition of sculpture. And what is the condition of sculpture?

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It's still, it's silent and it captures time. We have consciousness, sculpture has time and it waits for our ability to move in time, to think, to feel. And this for me, rather than trying to make the inert into a movie, allow the stillness and silence or sculpture to provoke us, viewers, into movement. And anyway, this for me is the challenge. For me, this potential of sculpture is to live in the elements, it doesn't need an institution, doesn't need a label, doesn't need a title. How do we return to that function of sculpture in which it begins to articulate our relationship with the earth and with time?

SS: *What you're saying right there about sculpture, that it doesn't need a title, it doesn't need a label, it just needs to be to start to articulate within a space. Do you feel the same about the body?*

AG: The whole story of hominin evolution is an extraordinary one because we all started, or sapiens sapiens started coming out of Africa maybe 70,000 years ago but there were several other attempts to leave Africa that failed. The first modern human is probably 300 million years old.

SS: *We haven't changed much since?*

AG: Sorry, what am I saying? 300,000. I would say we've changed very little. And that's the problem. As E.O. Wilson says, you know, we have Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions and then godlike technology. And the combination of these three very, you could say, historically distinct fixes within our psychophysical makeup, have rendered us pretty dangerous both to ourselves and to the planet simply because we are still going on the flight and fight. We are still treating territory and the availability of all resources as things we have to fight for and capture, which is very primitive because we have never in terms of our extended arm, in terms of our technology, humankind has never had such amazing capabilities. And it's a tragedy.

SS: *I think you're talking more about human nature rather than the human body. I do agree that no iPhone 1500 has been able to change the fact that humans killed for a piece of land and a piece of bread 100, 200, 500 years ago, they still continue to do that. So yeah, we don't evolve as for the human nature along with technology. But the role of the body does change. I mean, if you think of how it used to be treated like an object, and now little by little, you sort of get hold of it and you know, you are the owner of your body and more we go on, you know, less anyone is allowed to tell you what to do with your body. So in that sense, the role of the human body has certainly changed in society. You don't agree?*

AG: I don't agree. I think it's very remarkable, for example, how Phidian Greek ideals of bodily beauty are still very current, I mean, extraordinarily so, so that gyms the world over use Praxilitean or Phidian sculpture as kind of promotional or iconic models for the programs that they offer. And I think what you're talking about is a necessary change of sexual kind of role imposition which society is

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constantly re-addressing. But we seem to go round and round in circles. I mean, I think there's more sexual plasticity these days than before but then when you look back at human history, or certainly across all cultures, yeah, hermaphroditism was extremely, you know, understood, respected and even worshipped in the time of Periclean Athens. The acceptance of all forms of homosexuality were, again, understood, integrated. I'm very dubious about notions of progress being inscribed in the body.

SS: *When you do your installations, you do amazing sculptures of all sizes, and you say that this is to provoke people to think, to move, you do have a precise idea of where you would want them to move probably, no? When you say, for instance, I will go on doing as much as I can to make pieces that encourage people to think openly about what is possible for our species in the evolution of life. What is possible for our species in evolution of life?*

AG: Well, I think that we have to, first of all, reconsider what is life. The Renaissance had this notion of man as the measure of all things. And it's very clear, from the work of everybody from Lovelock through to E.O. Wilson, that we are totally embedded in the biosphere. And the biosphere is entirely responsible for the extraordinary relationship of gases that our body totally depends on. If there was only 18% of oxygen in the air, or there was 25%, our whole metabolism would not exist. The history of photosynthesis, in terms of the 4 billion years of life on this planet, is what has formed that atmosphere. And I think that maybe art's purpose now, having released itself from the need to illustrate either religious or state orthodoxies is to start to ask those questions about how human being fits within total being that means all life forms are on this planet. And it's of a very different order to man as the measure of all things. It is man maybe as the point of reflection of all things. I think we've come now at the beginning of another millennium to realise that actually art has to return those freedoms to the viewer, to the world, to all conscious beings and, say, this object which is really a space of possibility can be used as a location for the co-creation of meaning. So there's no determined truth, there is no, as it were, value system that this work attempts to approach. But together, maybe in using this work as a lens or an instrument to examine our own experience and the world around us, we can begin together to create something of value.

SS: *You're saying about, you know, concept versus aesthetic. And that's what modern art has come to – no one really cares about the form or the beauty, it's really about the concept, which is a good thing. And it is supposed to give the viewer the freedom that you inspire to give so you can examine yourself, life and your place in space and time. But then again, it has come to a point where, first, anyone pretty much who draws a line can say 'this is art' without any concept or any craft behind it and sell it for a million dollars. And that's just, you know, for me, mind-boggling that it has come to that. And second, the concept that they put into modern art, I don't want to sound mad, but I'm kind of sick of people doing it all around, you know, the concept that it puts in modern art, it dictates you what*

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to think, it does not give you the freedom to examine yourself in the space and life and the beginnings and the ends of this universe.

AG: Well, I think that we have to exercise discrimination as well as sympathetic interest in our engagement with each other and in all of the experiences that the world offers. I'm not unhappy about the fact that there are more artists doing more work than ever before. But it does, you know, what I'm proposing the beholders share, if you like, what the potential of art offers in terms of a place of co-production of meaning, you don't need to answer the invitation of every work saying, 'Look at me.' I think that the good thing about the proliferation of art in our time is that actually everybody has to, in some senses, simply for survival's sake, decide quite quickly: 'This is something that is speaking to me, this is something that I want to, in a way, invest time and attention to or not.' And in every age, there has always been a lot of –

SS: *Bad art?*

AG: Yeah.

SS: *But I feel like now more than ever, especially with the internet, anyone who's not lazy calls himself an artist. Shouldn't there be some sort of mechanism to sort artists out of non-artists?*

AG: Well, I think that it's not such a bad thing if everybody does think that they can have a go. It just puts a greater burden of responsibility on the looker –

SS: – *the beholder. Exactly.*

AG: The beholder has to be the critic and the judge, which I think is fine. Artists no longer wait for the approval of their elders and betters. They make shows for themselves in old factories, or on the road or anywhere. And there's a sense in which I think all of the orthodoxies of an administered culture have collapsed and you could say there are sad losses as a result of that. So the notion of counterculture has somewhat disintegrated in the face of this proliferation of creativity. But I think on the whole, for me, the fact that now there are more galleries, there are more collectors, there are more shows means that there is a genuine collective consciousness about the creativity of our time, and, in a way, we need to deal with it, so to decide what is worthy of your attention on what isn't, and I think that's – You know, in the old days, you'd know your football team, you'd know particular players.

SS: *I still do.*

AG: But in Britain, you wouldn't know your artists. But that's not true anymore. Everybody's got an opinion about Damien Hirst.

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SS: *No one is arguing with that, everyone knows there are artists they're just waiting –*

AG: But that's a good thing!

SS: *Yes or no, it's a good thing. But like, shouldn't there be some standards? I mean, imagine –*

AG: With a Ministry of Standards it sounds like 1984.

SS: *I know.*

AG: Ministry of Beauty.

SS: *Not beauty. Beauty isn't important anymore in art today, but some sort of standards. I mean, hear me out. Imagine if instead of your amazing, mind-boggling North Angel, it was some weird installation that no one really understood. No standards, but it is art for someone else who made it. And then people have to look at it every day. What are you going to do with it? I mean, it's not a piece of chicken that you cook, you can eat for yourself, and you're done with it. This is something that you put in a space, not your personal space, but you put it out there for people.*

AG: I think this is a really good question. What gives anyone the right, as it were, to litter the world with things that were not asked for by communities or people? When you do decide to work in a collective space, I think you have to work with the collective body. So you say 'my' angel – it's not my angel, I had an idea. But that idea was already a response to a desire of a community, a community that had been told by the middle of the 80s, that it had no future, that it actually had no meaning. I had this idea, I went to this place that had been told that it had no future and said, *"What can we do together to deny that, in a way, government audit?"* And this was an amazing collective. Coming together, we found shipbuilders who could bend ship plates to make the form of the body. We use this analogy of the ribs of a ship to rethink the body as a vessel. We work with the engineers of Newcastle University, with the virtual reality department in Sunderland University. There were maybe 200 people involved in the evolution of that and what was it? Well, it's a very pre-modern idea of art. This is a totem, this is a totem or a fetish that is a focus of a collective belief in a place, the community of that place, in a way, the common language of making of that place. The Angel of the North stands in an industrial valley, we have hundreds of little factories down there. The other side, it's just more land. And somehow this relationship, it's embedded in the texture of real life. And that for me is the most magic thing if somehow by putting this object that wasn't there before into this place, does the place itself become reflective? And then you're invited to think, *"What is the relationship between this more land and these factories?"* And you're invited to look at the landscape itself, not in the way that you might look at

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a cloud or a landscape painting, but the landscape itself as a picture, a picture that's telling you about human values, and about our feeling about the future.

SS: *It's been such a pleasure talking to you.*

AG: It was very short.

SS: *Thank you very much. I enjoyed every second of it.*

AG: Thank you, Sophie.