

SEANKELLY

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FEATURE:

Public defender: is **ANTONY GORMLEY** a people pleaser?

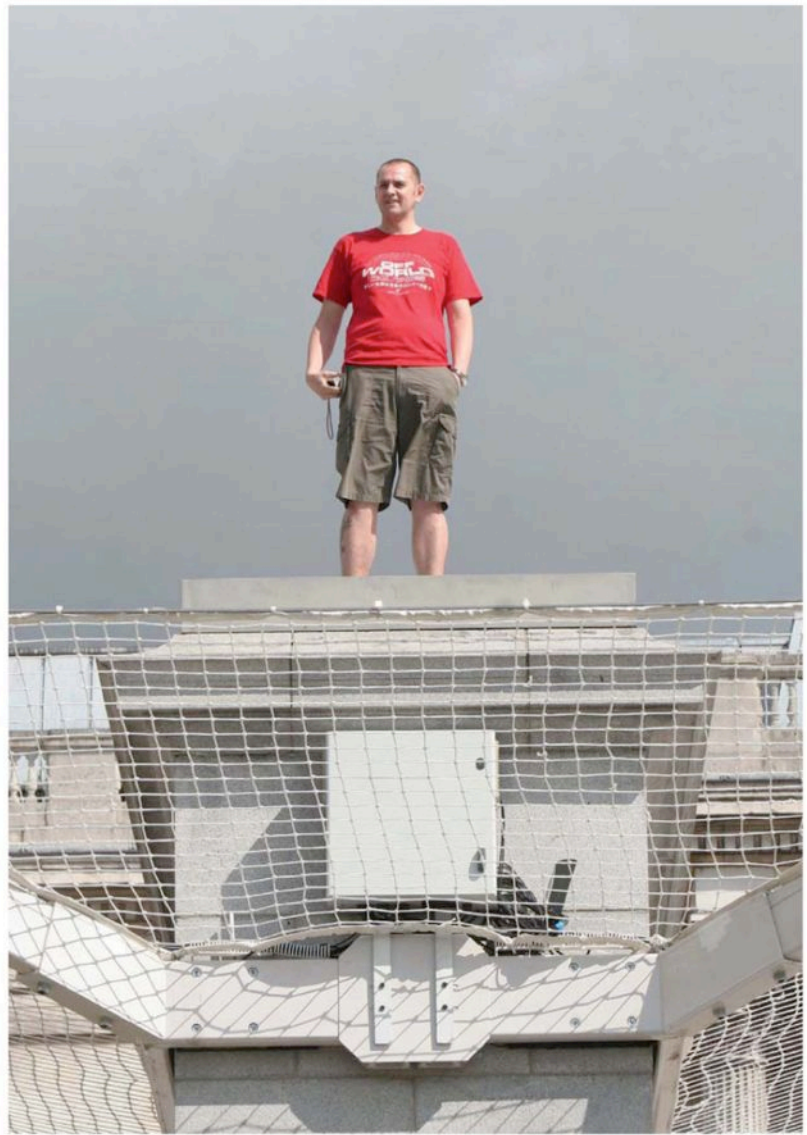
With his marathon 100-day project *One & Other*, the British sculptor has eschewed the conventions of the public art commission and handed over a part of London's Trafalgar Square to the great unwashed. J.J. Charlesworth talked to him about the evolution of the project, about what it means to be an artist in the public eye, and whether being popular means you can't be taken seriously too.



From the beginning your work has been grounded in a very singular vision of the generic, uninflected individual self, body, or being, and its distinction from the world around it. With your more recent work you have moved from the limit of the body to a dissolving of the limit of the body. Increasingly, you've worked in collaboration with other people, with groups of people. And now, the presence of the 'other', the 'public', is most explicitly set out in your new project for Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth, One & Other (2009). When did you become more preoccupied with wanting to change the terms of the relationship between your viewer and your work?

I think somewhere between making *Domain Field* (2003) and making *Blind Light* and *Hatch* (both 2007), the idea that the work wasn't complete until its field was somehow occupied by a living body became more and more pressing. And then the challenge was to somehow create spaces themselves where the viewer becomes the subject in a field, a 'field function'. You could say that there's a field function in *Field for the British Isles* (1993) and in *Allotment* (1995), in *Domain Field, Another Place* (1997) and *Inside Australia* (2003) – all of those in some sense reference the body, in some sense indicate the absent presences of others, and they invite you to somehow activate those mnemonic fields yourself. And in *Clearing* (2004), which is a very important work for me, it was the removal of any reference to the particulars of the body, and an allowance for the subject to be the viewer herself.

So *Clearing*, *Hatch* and *Blind Light* all try to articulate architectural space in such a way that the haptic and somatic experience of the individual is amplified. It's not very far from that to then saying that the plinth is itself a highly charged space, so why don't we use it in a similar way, as a ground to allow the subject to exist... It's an experiment in collective creativity, or making art without artists.



But no-one's going to get any of this! I find myself in a very odd position, I have to say... You know, I haven't talked to someone like you in about ten years! There has been absolutely no critical interest in my work whatsoever... It's interesting to me, because I think I'm conducting quite radical, conceptually tight programmes of articulated experiments about the potential of the space of art.

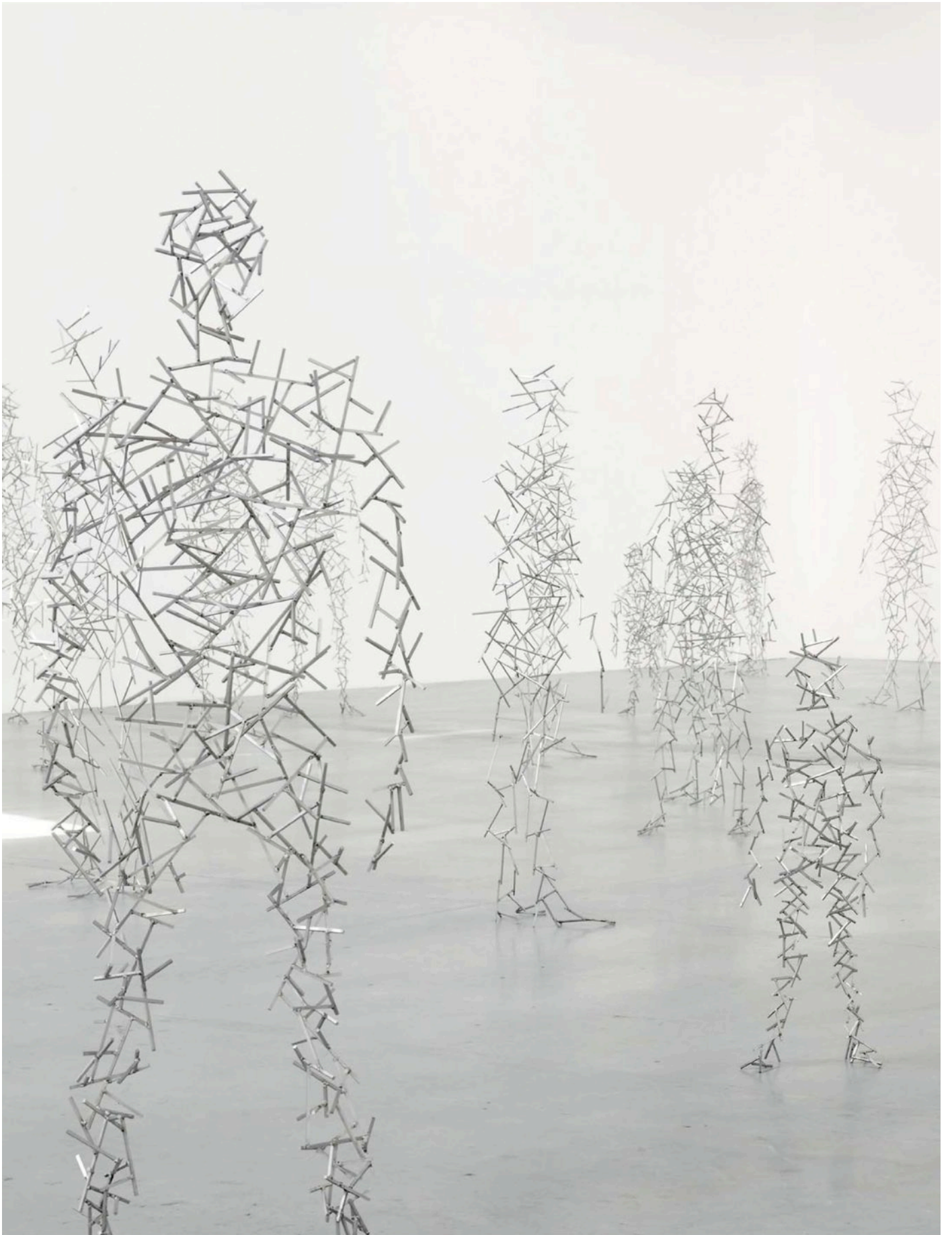
I can't believe that there's been no critical interest in your work in the last ten years...

Well, you know, from your sort of journals...

Is that because artists go in and out of 'fashion'?

I think it's an interesting phenomenon, because as far as I'm concerned I have some kind of public, but they're not interested in the side of the work that I think that I am trying to push: I think that the work is radical, but I'm seen by your profession as being populist, and that's a very curious position to be in. I think that I'm undertaking quite serious investigations, but I'm seen as some kind of showman, whatever. I'm sure this isn't an opportunity to vindicate myself, but I'm just very aware that there's a huge suspicion...

We wanted to ask you about these issues of populism, fashion, relevance, and the different constituencies that don't see art as the same thing, so when you say 'your



profession', I'd be interested to know who you mean by that and what you expect of them, or us, art magazines or the 'critical' press.

I guess I would like to feel that there's a critical community that is interested in the evolution of art, just as artists are, and the bond that unites us is stronger than the one that simply looks upon art as a form of entertainment, that is to be criticised, as a sort of 'hit or miss' attitude, and it does seem a shameful thing to acknowledge that the level of research that has been consistent in my work, is absolutely not acknowledged. I think I'm quite serious about what I do, and I try to do it professionally. The last review I had in *Artforum* was probably in 1993...

Well, I'm glad that we reviewed Blind Light, at the Hayward Gallery [in 2007]. Do you think that there's a point at which an artist can become detached from one culture and go into another? This is a point about what it means to be famous, or in the public eye.

I think there's a very strong sense that if you are in the public eye and you end up, as it were, in the newspapers, you can't possibly be a serious artist. That's a suspicion I have. Broadly speaking I still feel that the critical fraternity is *ex camera* as to whether or not my project is viable, and that they would prefer to remain silent because it's too dangerous to do otherwise. I still feel there are orthodoxies that would prefer the safer course of action of remaining silent, rather than leaping in and trying to make sense of something you really don't 'like the smell of'.

There's a lot of idiosyncrasy in new art today, a huge investment in all the detail of the wider culture, of popular culture and common experience. Do you wonder whether the aspect of universalism or universalising that exists in your work could be something which might be currently out of fashion – for better or worse?

You mean the ghost of a renaissance humanism, or the shadow of a nostalgia for a modernist Utopia?

I could do! I'm all for Universalism. I get a bit frustrated when I'm told off for thinking that art could aspire to some kind of commonality.

Well, I think I would say that I'm still absolutely committed to the idea of sculpture; I'm still committed, almost in a Greenbergian way, to the idea that every artform has its unique and particular essential characteristics, and that it's the duty of an artist to honour them, or anyway acknowledge them, and contravene them at his own risk. I would say that the problem with a lot of what has been made, at least as I see it, since Richard Serra, Carl Andre and Bruce Nauman, in American art, is a tendency to retreat into a kind of hermetic space... maybe with artists such as Robert Gober or Matthew Barney; they're not exploring the syntax of a sculptural language for its own sake. In Barney's case, there's a very poor assimilation of European culture, filmic and art historical, with an overblown filmmaking rhetoric. I'm just using American art as an example of a trend in which grand narratives are suspected, and even the notion of the distinct nature of different artforms has become smudged. I think it's difficult for artists practicing today. By contrast, the investigations that I've been undergoing are attempting to expand and evolve concerns that are absolutely sculptural, with an acknowledgement that the social dimension of space is absolutely unavoidable. The best way I could describe what I'm doing both in the landscape work and in the urban work, and in the work I do in museums and galleries is that I'm trying to do Richard Serra again, but after Beuys. But I don't think people understand my position very well.

There seems to be a contradiction then: on the one hand there's an exclusive art which pretends to be immersed in popular culture; and on the other hand, you're seen as

someone who might have a popular audience, and in which being popular becomes a matter of suspicion. It's a very peculiar split. And this, even when you are talking about very rigorous, clearly defined questions that have to do with a particular tradition of thinking about the experience of sculpture, architecture, physical and social space.

Starting with *Field* I have used the model of collaboration or working directly with other bodies, or other minds and bodies, to make work. I think I'm very aware of what the dangers are but I take them with a degree of commitment, but also acknowledgement that you can fall flat on your face. I think that's true of the plinth – the plinth may evolve into something interesting, or it may be doomed simply by the set of its own algorithms. All of the decisions about what is controlled and what is random with the plinth are, I think, determined by formal decision-making which becomes political decision-making; and then trying to attend to the pragmatics of the administration of the idea.

The formal becomes political?

The formal becomes political because when you want to take a slice of something – it's a form of revelation which is about 'slicing', just as in my early work I might have sliced through a tree trunk to reveal the rings – you have to decide how to do that, so in this case I've just taken the landmass of the UK and decided to distribute the hours demographically, and then use random selection. Now, if I had been more interested in the performative aspect of this, as opposed to the revelation of a sample, I would have sifted through proposals and made a very careful selection of who did what on the plinth. But that's not the point. The point is to reveal, through self-selection, this cross-section of the human population of the British Isles. And in a way what they do when they get there is completely irrelevant. You could have put two footprints on one

end of the plinth and told participants to stand there as still as they could for an hour, but I didn't want to impose, because what I've learnt, certainly in making *Field*, is that actually, if you believe in a self-generative principle, the distinction between using somebody and involving somebody becomes crucial. There's part of me, the anthropologist side of me, that really wants to rethink a model of art where collective participation is the norm, rather than an exception. So it's the idea of saying 'here is our space, now we're going to see what happens in it.'

You don't want to be the curator of a programme?

No, because that would have been to conventionalise it completely... I think that the existential experiment – how does a human being behave when given limited choices, being allowed to exercise free will within a very limited area and then being exposed to time and the elements – I think that that's a big subject. Once you acknowledge

that this is the exposing of a singular body in a place of symbolisation and representation, and then seeing how it reads there, and whether there's any failure of connection between substance and appearance, or between who somebody is and what they're doing – things then start to get very interesting, but I wouldn't expect people will be very entertained by it. In fact, it's the very opposite of entertainment – but the challenge is then to allow that thing of exposure, vulnerability, isolation, operating through duration, to become available to an audience, through its being broadcast over the Net.

You've let yourself into something which is quite different to all your previous work; because this very charged field of public space is a political, social field, with certain limits and constraints. You're quite explicit that there was a bygone age of cultural hierarchy and authority embodied in the form of a figure

being higher up than the mass or the group. So it strikes me that this is contributing to an important discussion in Britain around public art in the last decade. There's this tension with regards to the legitimacy of the artist as a public figure, and the license given to people to occupy space culturally according to their own wishes or interests. Did you know that this was going to be a big part of it?

I would say that there's always going to be social resistance to the idea of breaking conventions or at least testing them. The Westminster Council planning department is fairly conservative, for example. But maybe the background to your question is the old question of to what extent the artist betrays his or her independence from the forces of social convention once they start messing around in that arena.

I think what's interesting is that you've licensed a public to pursue its own interest, and it's required the figure of the artist to be absent, but also administratively present to enable that to happen.

It's very interesting, this thing about 'allowing'. For example, I was 'allowed' to make that sculpture [pointing to an image of *Architecture for Subjective Experience* (2008) his pavilion with David Chipperfield], because it's a sculpture for the subjective experience of architecture. If it was an architecture for the subjective experience of sculpture, it would not have been allowed. This is a kind of physical parable that talks about the relative positions – the so-called responsibility of the architect versus the conventionally understood irresponsibility of the artist. And you could say that one of the things that *One & Other* does is it tries to share the liberty of the artist with the citizen. And you can tell very quickly how far the citizen wants to go with that. But you could argue the other way round, that the artist is highly conventionalised – we've had to put up a health and safety net, which





is on one level a tragedy, because the thing is so much clearer if the danger of occupying a very high plinth is part of the experience! I'm interested in what happens when you escape from the equal conventions of the studio, and try to do original things in collective space that is already administered and subject to civic laws and convention.

What do you make of those comments that this is 'public art for the reality TV age'?

You can't deny that the way we've tried to implicate the Net into it acknowledges the reality of Facebook, Twitter and the rest of it, and they are integrated in the website, but the issue for me is how it contravenes those conventions – there's no competition, there's no voting people off the plinth... It's a strange thing, the desire, amongst the public, to undergo quite severe humiliation to somehow be blessed with 'mediatisation'. I hope the project

takes it somewhere else, though, that the idea is of celebrating the individual citizen as a repository of collective memory and as a maker of the future. But we don't enquire what the people want to do.

Does this tell you something new about how people see their role in public now? One of your early public projects was the sculptures you installed in Northern Ireland, in Derry in 1987, a place where public space was politically very charged, and where the sculptures were met with a degree of hostility from the local communities. Do you think that the idea of the individual has since become more 'performative' and self-referencing, more individuated?

The intriguing thing is the huge way in which the public have possessed, explored and extended invitations

to participate in contemporary art projects. I'd like to think that what *One & Other* represents is an extraordinary change that's happened within the collective consciousness over the past ten years, where people recognise that art is a space of exploration: that it's an open test site, a site for individuals to test their own potential. ■

Next month Edgar Schmitz looks at the ways in which popularity now shapes the infrastructure of art, plus profiles of Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami