

Appleyard, Bryan. "Make an exhibition of yourself," *The Sunday Times*,  
March 1, 2009.

**Antony Gormley wants you. Bryan Appleyard finds out why the artist needs 2,400 people to stand on the Fourth Plinth for an hour — but not all at once**

# Make

**A**ntony Gormley, very tall, stooped, stands behind me, much of his body in close contact with mine. We are peering at some metalwork, a mock-up of the structure of *Drift*, a gigantic, open, cloudlike frame containing, as almost always with Gormley, the figure of a man. This vast object will hang in the 88-metre-tall atrium of a hotel in Singapore. "Hopefully," he says, "it will be an incredibly moving experience, this sense of vertigo as you look down from the balconies — it's transparent, and you'll see through it to the people below." He likes big things, big spaces, but not, apparently, when he's talking to people. Then he seems to prefer no space at all. I don't quite know what to make of the proximity thing, but anyway... "Drift is the biggest thing we're doing at the moment. Well, we are going to build this 50-metre-high sculpture in Dublin. It's not called anything at the moment. Somebody suggested Rain Man... There's no reason why it shouldn't go ahead, apart from the fact that the Celtic tiger seems to be dead."

We are in Gormley's huge London studios, designed by David Chipperfield, just north of King's Cross. Walking the mile or so from the station, I pass a car valeting shop. Outside, an overalled shop dummy has been attached to some kind of machine that makes it beckon people in with both arms. It looks like a parody of a Gormley man, done by an unusually light-hearted Robert Rauschenberg. I am entering, it is clear, Gormleyland. "Oh, yeah, I've seen that," he comments noncommittally.

There's nothing obviously Gormleyesque about the face his studios present to the world. Press the buzzer in a blank wall and a gigantic galvanised-steel door slides back to reveal a courtyard, bleakened today by a chill wind, icy rain and a covering of slush. Two galvanised staircases, made treacherous by the weather, lead up to the first floor, where Gormley and his team are deep in a conference call to Singapore about *Drift*. He seems to be one of those people who think you have

to talk much louder when it's long-distance. Finally, he comes out to greet me, leaving his people to deal with the somewhat nervous-sounding guy from the Far East.

"David!" he greets me.

Huh? Better sort that one out. But he's off, talking to various assistants. Some indecipherable faffing later, he returns, having established that I am called Bryan, and takes me to see the big studio. And it is big, very. Various Gormley bodies — they are usually based on his own body — are standing and hanging about, and some light and not so light engineering work is being carried out. Then we go up the other galvanised staircase and sit down at a table covered with various exploratory patterns of black blotches on paper.

We are here to talk about his scheme for the Fourth (empty) Plinth on Trafalgar Square. I am part of the story because publicity is essential to make it work.

"Yeah, yeah, we need you guys..."

Me and this David, I guess.

On Thursday, a website — [www.oneandother.co.uk](http://www.oneandother.co.uk) — was launched, inviting people to take part in his latest work, *One & Other*. This is produced by a company called Artichoke and backed by Sky Arts and other, as yet unnamed, sponsors. It was chosen by the mayor of London's Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group. A video will be shown concurrently at the National Portrait Gallery, and an as yet unknown institution will get the archive.

You can register online for free and, at the end of this process, 2,400 people will be picked. The choice will be entirely



random, except that each region of the country will be represented in proportion to its population: 330 from London, just over 200 from Scotland and so on. Nobody is disqualified, the disabled included.

"This is, in a way, a process of democratisation, where people are not being judged. It is very, very important" — Gormley tends to double up his adverbs, for some reason — "that they are not. They are not judged on what they might do, how they might perform or on their ethnicity. The only criterion is that we want it to be a portrait of Britain now, and want people from all over Britain to participate." He mentions the documentaries of Humphrey Jennings and the Mass Observation surveys of British life as precursors.

The, as it were, winners will each get one hour on the plinth — it runs round the clock for 100 days, hence the 2,400 figure. They can do what they like, and they can carry stuff up there, provided they don't need help doing that.

The mind, obviously, boggles. In the exhibitionist culture both created and reflected by reality TV, will some Jade Goody wannabe go for something sensational? Given that, in summer, at least a third of the people will be appearing at night, the chances of some of them going for outright sleazy are high. A spokesman for the project says nakedness is okay, but anything illegal — meaning obscene — will result in the plinth-dweller being removed by the staff, though probably not in time to prevent the tabloids from getting their shots or taking screen grabs from the video link from Sky, which is filming the whole thing. Gormley is unconcerned, but others will be, notably the mayor's office and Sky TV.

Is this magnet for exhibitionists sculpture? The only physical addition to the plinth itself will be a net projecting outwards at a slight upward angle.

"That's obviously important as a safety device, but it's also important in terms of talking about the vulnerability and exposure of the person at the top — this idea that you are alone in a

very public place, really exposed and, therefore, in danger, not simply from the fact that you are eight metres above the ground, but also, perhaps, from what others might do to you. It feels like a basketball net or a trampoline, but it's also a fence."

The net aside, is he doing sculpture here?

"It's the making of a piece of sculpture in time. It's asking fairly fundamental questions about who can make art and how it can be made, who can participate in it, and important questions about representation. What I'm hoping is that this will tell us something we don't already know about what people think and feel about being alive now."

It's going to be a big moment for 2,400 people, but also for Gormley, a strange man who needs careful attention. Married with three children, all of whom seem to be heading in the direction of art, he is 58, and his very short hair is dyed very black. He's wearing pale jeans, a grey, long-sleeved T-shirt, big boots and wire glasses. He has the air of an eastern European intellectual and a manner that seems absent-minded but isn't really. Though his conversation is rambling and full of those doubled adverbs — "terribly, terribly" and "totally, totally" occur a lot — it rambles around a clear centre, the work in all its monumental and very non-rambling simplicity.

Of all the successful British art that has emerged in the past 20 years, his is probably the most popular and generally accepted. He is — and he will hate this, but it's true — a very establishment figure. He was established primarily by the Angel of the North, the gigantic, industrial figure that looms over the A1 at Gateshead and memorialises both the miners who once worked deep beneath its feet and the whole manufacturing culture that has vanished, but, as he wryly observes, we now desperately need to get back.

"It was to do with a very strong loss of hope in the north and a complete breakdown — post the miners' strike, post the shipyards shutting down — and a sense of loss of Britain's long tradition of making things."

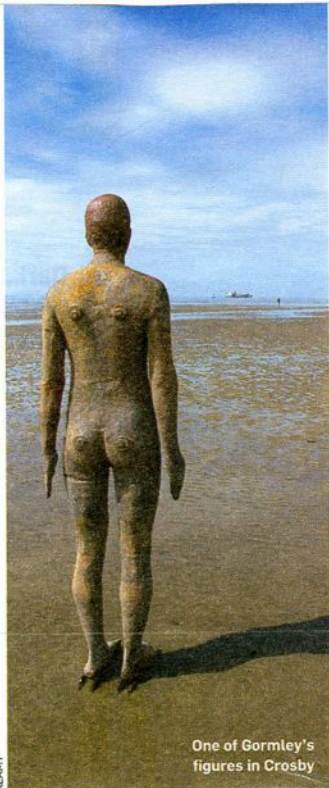
The Angel proved so popular that it spawned imitations, not all of which he approves of. "It's a terrible thing to have a precedent like that," he admits. And he has said elsewhere: "A lot of public art is gunge, an excuse which says, 'We're terribly sorry to have built this senseless glass and steel tower, but here is this 200ft bronze cat.'" He is, however, all for Mark Wallinger's giant horse, to be erected at Ebbsfleet, Kent. "He brilliantly manages to combine the Englishness of the chalk-horse tradition with the 'now' of the race meeting's obsession with betting. It is something that is both ancient and modern."

The Angel — as well as all Gormley's subsequent work, but especially One & Other — is, before it is anything else, a critique of modernism. "It's a very odd thing to me, the failure of modernism. When Mondrian talks about art that is open for everyone, he's talking in a sense about the very same thing I'm interested in, a place of open participation for everyone. But that failed because it became institutionalised itself, in a way that made it a specialist realm of human endeavour. I'm not interested in the idea of artist as hero. I'm saying that art is an open space of reference and reflection, where, hopefully, human freedom can be expressed. With One & Other, I'm saying, 'I need an hour of your life to make this real.'"

The dry, abstract scholasticism of some late modernism seemed to mark the return of art to the galleries from which it had briefly aspired to escape. Gormley's big, public art was a rejection of all that. Furthermore, everybody could see what his Angel and his man-figures were meant to be — people. But he squirms when I use the phrase "aggressively figurative" to describe his style. He is very concerned to stress that his figures are not representations of people, or even symbols of people; they are, rather, shadows of where people have been.

"I think the issue of incarnation, of embodiment, is the fundamental conundrum. We are minds embedded in bodies, or we are bodies that have become reflective, and who we

*Continued on page 7* ▶



One of Gormley's figures in Crosby

► *Continued from page 5*

are and what we are remains a huge question – an exciting question. What I offer is simply a trace of where a body once was. It's not an interpretation, it is an index."

Gormley found his, so to speak, range with Field in 1991. This consisted of thousands of little terracotta figures, each gazing at the viewer. It lives on, being re-created and reinstalled around the world. It was big, it involved figures and it was public, in the sense that it was entirely directed at the viewer. As a work of art, it could not be said to exist unless somebody was looking at it. With works like *Iron: Man in Birmingham* in 1993 and *Another Place* in 1997 – 100 cast-iron figures, now permanently staring out to sea on Crosby Beach, near Liverpool – he developed the insight of Field. He had become very public and, in the highest sense, noncommittal. These traces of men invited viewers to bring their own meanings and references. They also (this is me, not him) seem to hark back to the fascination in early modernism, notably in Picasso, with the inscrutable monumentality of African masks and statues.

Growing up in Kent, Gormley had a strong Catholic upbringing. He went to Ampleforth College and Cambridge, where he read anthropology and history of art. By then, alone among his siblings, he had lost his faith. Elsewhere, he has said that his father used religion "as a tool of emotional abuse", but to me he is a good deal more mellow, preferring to emphasise his father's conscientious introductions to art, particularly of the Italian Renaissance. And the loss of faith? "I had a sense of being controlled by something that was unsupportable by any rational or

inquiring mind, and a part of growing up was questioning all the precepts and, in a way, the moral and intellectual structure I had grown up with. That was a part of going to university, a part of this whole thing of looking at other cultures."

He did, however, take to Buddhism, and it's not too much of a stretch to see a link between the inscrutability of his own figures and those of the great Buddha statues of the Far East. Both seem to exude a paradoxical knowledge of something that it is not quite possible to know. "Buddhism," he says, "is really practical, very practical. It helps. It's about facing the fact of being, in a very direct way, and I think it's an alternative form of knowledge that is not about the ingestion of facts or theories."

One & Other signals that he might be about to leave his enigmatic man-figures behind. "Maybe..." he says. Then he shows me a book about his work *Breathing Room* – simply a series of frames through which the viewer walks, thus becoming part of the work. It plainly anticipates *One & Other*, in which the viewer in the work is all, the net aside, that the work is.

He's genuinely nervous about the Fourth Plinth. It's a step away from literal monumentality towards installation art, a big step for him, the biggest since Field gave him his mature style. He's also worried that not enough people will apply to take part, and shrugs wearily when I point out that, at the very least, he will get the usual "modern art is rubbish" publicity.

For me, there's a charming but worrying innocence about *One & Other*. We are already a culture corrupted by exhibitionism

## How to take part

In total, 2,400 participants will be chosen. The organisers will use a computer programme to select participants at random, while representing the population density of different parts of the UK. Participants must be aged 16 and over on July 6, 2009, and must live, or be staying in, the UK.

Registration is open now: sign up at [www.oneandother.co.uk](http://www.oneandother.co.uk) or send a large stamped addressed envelope (with stamps to the value of £1.08) to: One & Other  
c/o Artichoke  
Toynbee Studios  
28 Commercial Street  
London E1 6AB

and the pursuit of fame, however fleeting. If this descends into one long wannabe freak show, then maybe it will be a portrait of Britain now, but not, I suspect, quite the one Gormley intends. The risk of a debacle that sends art scurrying back to Cork Street, Hoxton and the Tate is real. Gormley, the leading public artist of our time, may find himself disappointed by the public. □

*bryanappleby.com*

View a slideshow of  
Gormley masterpieces at  
[timesonline.co.uk/visualarts](http://timesonline.co.uk/visualarts)

