

# SEAN KELLY

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## Interview with Antony Gormley

*The British sculptor, whose naked form has been cast and displayed across the world, speaks to Libby Powell about masculinity, movement and the adventure of being human.*

**You so often cast your male figure as standing straight, tall and proud – in an environment where absent fathers are blamed for rioting children, and where urban life moves us further away from traditional male functions. How do you see the evolving role of the male figure in today's world?**



Antony Gormley SPLICE V, 2011 Cast iron 178 x 44 x 35cm  
397 Kg Photograph by Stephen White, London © the artist

In some senses there is no figure, just a space/place where a body once was. Perhaps that body's sexuality is less important than its verticality. The bodies are male, they are gendered, but you have to take more account of where it is placed and to where it is looking. The verticality of the body against the horizontality of the horizon is critical. I'm not sure if these works present an ideal of maleness or more usefully question the things that the traditional statue has stood for and indeed the whole notion of the standing of a statue. My body is a found object. I would like to think the body-surrogates I make from it are as vulnerable as they are resistant. Resistant to time but in dialogue with time. They are about feeling, about a reconciliation of the uniqueness and aloneness of every human in birth and death, while being open to everything that can happen in-between.

I am trying to work in the space between the standing of a statue and the object-nature of a sculpture asking what kind of job it can do. I'm interested in how we might project exactly those qualities of maleness and find them confounded. Speaking personally, I think that gender is something that is made, not given, and I think we are exploring what we mean by the various textures and complexions of masculinity.

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**As you reproduce and exhibit the human form, do you do so with a sense of pride in being human?**

More with a sense of asking what it is to be human and how we, as an animal, turned out this way. We are the most vertical animal, our spines have become a vertical column. When we walk we do so not with security of four limbs but by constantly recovering from falling. What do we do with our verticality? We look out towards the eyes of others of our species and the horizon. The verticality of the bodies in *Another Place*, *Another Time*, *Time Horizon* and *Horizon Field* has to be put against the opposite that is to be found in the arrested and falling bodies of *Critical Mass*. *Critical Mass* is an acknowledgement of the dark

side of human nature; an acknowledgement of the 20th century as a century in which the industrialization of killing has become commonplace and the way in which, as Foucault suggests, the public spectacle of pain has been introverted.

This work is about fallout as an internalized public spectacle, the internal conditions of depression, the secrecy of Western torture and the special renditions that have characterized both the Iraq and Afghan campaigns that are in some senses the true cost of a continued Western hegemony. Critical Mass is an important critical balance to the traditional assumption that the social duty of sculpture (as the most public of the arts) is statuemaking that celebrates the structures of power and the status quo. I wish to use it to undermine, question and objectify the negative energies within the purposes of the West.



Antony Gormley *CRITICAL MASS II*, 1995 Cast iron 60 life-size elements; variable sizes Installation view, StadtRaum Remise, Vienna Photograph by Stephen White, London © the artist

***Some of your work costs hundreds of thousands of pounds to create. Is there a role for such art in times of recession and austerity?***

This continued obsession with maintaining our world power – Britain’s alliance with France in the Libya campaign and the US in the Iraq wars – is based on a continuation of the deployment of the latest instruments of aggression that are a result of a burgeoning arms industry. The possibility of using, often, the same materials and indeed the same industries (of ordnance and steel production) to make benign objects that investigate the collectivity and singularity of human experience seems to me utterly justifiable. Art, while feeding off the economics of its time, has to be independent of economics. Truth, value and meaning do not come from amounts of money spent, or not spent, on their production or consumption, but the intentionality of the works and what they attempt to explore or expose. Every work is an attempt to make an account of its time and place. We have now evolved from the duty of art to simply mirror a retinal image of the world to something more critical, something that moves behind the appearance of things. The work then becomes a critical tool in the balancing of life and becomes a space of exchange and interrogation of words, images and meaning.

***You spent time in India and Sri Lanka exploring Buddhism, and you recently created a dance for Shoalin monks. Would you consider yourself a spiritual person?***

I was brought up a Catholic. Anyone born into a devout Catholic family and then sent to a Benedictine monastic school has a kind of truth deficit and will have for the rest of their lives. Catholicism is a

universal system that answers all questions. I lost my faith at the age of 17, and in some sense my life ever since has been an attempt to replace Catholic truths with something more rationally sustainable. Faith has been replaced by scepticism but I have faith in the process of scepticism itself. I believe that we become most truly ourselves when placed at the threshold of the unknowable and seek to make thresholds that allow us our own vulnerability in the face of the imponderables of death and the loss of self possession. I found a spiritual discipline through meditation. I believe the mind-body instrument is an infinitely extendable tool and that the adventure of being human is far from over. I feel that sculpture, and my and others' engagement with it, is an invitation to test and extend the condition of being human.

***The One and Other project invited members of the public to stand for an hour on the fourth plinth in London's Trafalgar Square. At a time when celebrity obsession is reaching its zenith, did you take pleasure in putting normal people on a pedestal?***

*The One and Other project was an attempt to democratize the idealized position of the statue in our culture by allowing people to represent themselves and allow their lives and beings to become a picture or a symbol for others.*

Obviously it worked against the background of popular contemporary cultural forms like reality and celebrity competitive television, but put those formats to a very different use. The point is that human diversity is as important as bio-diversity and we need to celebrate it. It's important to say that the selection was not to be based on what someone might perform; people were invited to use their hour in the way they saw fit and they were chosen entirely by random.

***Another Place, for me, had echoes of the immigrant cockle-pickers who died in the sea along the same coastline due to dangerous and illegal working conditions. In the Asian Field project, the commissioning of hundreds of local workers to manually produce tiny clay figures was interesting given the growing awareness of the concerning labour practices in factories across China and South East Asia – as a manual artist, does the practices of the global labour market trouble you?***



Antony Gormley ANOTHER PLACE, 1997 Cast iron 189 x 53 x 29cm (100 elements) Installation view, Cuxhaven, Germany  
Photograph by Helmut Kunde, Kiel © the artist

Marx predicted the exploitation of labour as a concomitant follower of the exploitation of resources in the hands of those in possession of the means of production. I am concerned with revisiting industrial, agricultural and hunter-gatherer nomadic forms of life support. *Another Place* was based on an

examination of the ideology of immigration and the motivations that link contemporary migrants (the boat people of South East Asia, the escapees from Northern Africa seeking a home in Europe or those that leave Cuba for the coast of Florida).

In an unequal world in which we accept the massive mobility of monetary instruments across borders, we seem to have difficulty in accepting the movement of living people. Both the *Field* projects and *Another Place* attempt to make an objective correlative of this process and try to question it. Both works attempt to make a place in which the unseen, unheard, faceless and voiceless are acknowledged.

***Going back to the Asian Field project and the creation of a new miniature population – a comment on overpopulation? If so, what do you see as the best solution.***



Antony Gormley ASIAN FIELD, 2003 Clay from Guangdong Province, China 210,000 hand-sized clay elements made in collaboration with 350 people of all ages from Xiangshan village, north-east of the city of Guangzhou in south China Installation view, Warehouse of Former Shanghai No. 10 Steelworks, Shanghai, 2003 Photograph by Dai Wei (Shanghai) © the artist

It's clear that as the global population reaches 7 billion we will begin to unbalance the ability of the Earth to provide support for our species, and I think we have to have faith that human evolution is now linked to technological evolution and that bio-engineering as well as other technologies will have to come together to find new forms of harnessing renewable energy. The Western world is seeing drops in population but we simply need to be aware that the goal of a globalized humanity has to be sharing of resources and opportunities and this will never happen while rampant overpopulation continues. If we don't manage our

own demands and resource distribution then the combined pressures of famine, epidemics and increased social unrest will do their work in controlling populations, but I don't relish this kind of apocalyptic scenario. Partial extinction is often a prelude to total extinction.

extinction is inevitable, eventually, but it is our decision as to how long we wish the human species to be part of the life of this planet. It's a question of whether our combined intelligences can work to discover our nature in nature or whether we, by being hard-wired into a cultural distinction from nature, end up destroying it and ourselves with it.

***Do you view your work as borderless, or is each piece tied to the site and the community it rests in?***

Very often, like *Another Place* or *Critical Mass*, the work comes out of a dialogue with a place. In the case of *Another Place*, that dialogue was with the immigration halls in Cuxhaven. In the case of *Critical Mass*, it was an examination of the Remise train depot in Vienna – a place that I recognized as a meditation ground for the Holocaust and, by implication, all acts of genocide. Both of those works, while being exhibited in the spaces that gave rise to them, that were in a sense their placenta, then went on to have lives elsewhere.

Rarely and most beautifully, works do come from a dialogue with a particular site and then find their place in that situation, but that is not always the case. The nomadic life of art objects as objects of exchange in many senses has also been a fate of mine. This is not ideal, but I accept it.

***You create very still, silent figures. Is there a place where can you be still and quiet?***

I'm most quiet and still when travelling at speed in planes or trains and I have always found the greatest stillness when moving against wind or tide in a boat. But I have also tried to find places of quietude in the places that I live – a place ideally under the rafters, close to the sky.