

# SEANKELLY

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## Esquire

### ESQ&A: ARTIST ANTONY GORMLEY

Britain's leading sculptor on his favourite pieces and why public art is still important



Since a solo exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery started Antony Gormley's career in 1981, the British sculptor has created many much-loved works, including the famous *Angel of the North* and *Event Horizon* – a multi-part site installation which went from London to New York to São Paulo.

We spoke to Gormley ahead of his appearance on *CNN Ones to Watch* in which he reveals his pick of rising artistic talent.

Below, the artist offers his views on the current state of public art, his personal favourite works and what's to come.

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**The *Angel of the North* has become a regional symbol – did you envisage that when you first set out to sculpt it?**

Certainly not. The *Angel of the North* was an experiment. I always thought that it was a transitional object for a community in crisis, trying to survive the transition between the industrial and information ages; something to celebrate its past, but confidently proclaim its right to a future – that's what it became and that's encouraging. It suggests that art can have a social function beyond the memorial; that it can work as a focus for people's hopes and fears.

**In recent years, the selling of public art has increased. Why is it important that we protect this art and what is the value of losing these works?**

The value is in keeping them. The fact is that 'imaginative furniture' – things that are not motorway bridges, street lamps or post boxes – allow us to look at our world in a different way, to call upon our powers of contemplation, meditation and imagination. We are not all machines just here to work, to get old and to die; we are here to make futures for ourselves and for others.

Art, in changing the complexion of an immediate part of the world, encourages people to feel that they can participate in it. It is a political expression of self and collective determination.



**Can you name three of your favourite public artworks?**

If we mean by public art things that are 'out there', they would probably all be ancient. I love the Pyramids, the Pantheon and the Ring of Brodgar in the Orkneys.

But I also love the piece of brass laid in the high street of Wells, Somerset which marks the world record and Olympic gold-medal winning jump of British athlete, Mary Rand. I love Postman's Park in London that was founded by George Frederic Watts where acts of bravery are celebrated in terracotta plaques.

I also like *The Vertical Earth Kilometer* (1977) in Friedrichsplatz, Kassel Germany by Walter di Maria. This is a two inch diameter brass disc in the pavement which actually goes down a kilometre into the earth. All of these are places that make you think and feel things in a different way.

**What project are you working on next?**

I am working on an exhibition of over 100 sculptures installed in the grounds of the Forte di Belvedere in Florence for late April. It's an opportunity to consider the relationship between beauty and terror on this defended hill opposite the Renaissance city that is laid out in front of you like some sort of ideal. We tend to forget the likelihood of violent death for people in the 15th century, which was nevertheless the context in which the sublime art of Fra Angelico arose. In our own time we admire the sublime painting and abstract paintings of Richter, but violent death with civilian life as its battleground is still happening all around us.

**Do you feel that artwork is still accessible or do people face increased barriers?**

Happily the recondite period of art is over. Two things have happened: firstly, people are more familiar with contemporary art generally and therefore more able to look at it for what it is. Secondly, artists have become more interested in real-life issues.

The combination of the two has made the arena of art more occupied. I think this is a great thing. There is still some fear of not knowing how to respond, but all art is a sounding board and if we can use it to 'sense ourselves sensing', all of that fear can fall away.

The question remains: "How do I feel when sharing space with this object, this image, this thing?" and each of us answers it in our own way.