

# SEANKELLY

“I’m not Dead Yet!: Antony Gormley, a work in Progress ,” *The Financial Times*, October, 2017.

## Visual Arts

### ‘I am not dead yet!’: Antony Gormley, a work in progress

The sculptor talks about a new book that spans his career to date



Sculptor Antony Gormley © Lydia Goldblatt

8 HOURS AGO by Peter Aspden

I am holding a heavy, early proof copy of Martin Caiger-Smith’s new book on [Antony Gormley](#). Its pages are beautifully designed and illustrated, and dense with insight and deeply considered analysis from the author. But most of all they are heavy. Heavy in every sense. It is quite a piece of work, I begin to say to Gormley as we take our seats in a quiet space in his north London studio, when he suddenly interrupts me: “I just want to put my hand up and say, ‘I am not dead yet!’ ”

Noted. In our whirlwind tour of the studio, I have seen enough projects in progress to testify to Gormley’s frenetic and ever-evolving activity. But this is the kind of meaty tome — reflective, definitive in tone and highly complimentary — that is more commonly written in the past tense. Gormley, 67, instead considers it a mid-career survey. “I’d like it to be seen as ‘the story so far . . . ’,” he says.

It could have been longer still. “Martin had access to whatever he thought he wanted — I’ve got nothing to hide.” But the two men decided not to delve too far into school reports and Indian travel diaries. “The story of the work is the story,” says Gormley simply. “Right now I am better-placed to learn, and listen, and move forward, than ever before. And the book is part of that process: where have I got to, and where do I go from here?”

I take him back to his professional beginnings: his return to England in 1974 after a three-year sojourn in the east that followed his graduation from Cambridge. He had warned his father not to expect a conventional career choice: “I really don’t think that I am ready to enter industry or commerce in any way,” he wrote to him from university, in that bracing way of the counter-culture years.

What he was ready for, at this relatively young age, was to ask people to take his art seriously. “I had already focused my ambition to be an artist. At school (Central, followed by Goldsmiths, and then the Slade) my attitude was slightly different from many of my colleagues,” he recalls. “I thought this was an incredibly precious time, and I had to use every minute of it.”



'Insider VII' (1998) © Stephen White/Antony Gormley

At Goldsmiths, Gormley found himself torn between two competing schools of thought: one that regarded art as a continuum, and the other that called for it to be revolutionary. “I thought, what I would like to make is a revolutionary continuum,” he says with the vaguest hint of mischief. Those philosophical investigations led him to the subject that has inspired his work ever since: the body.

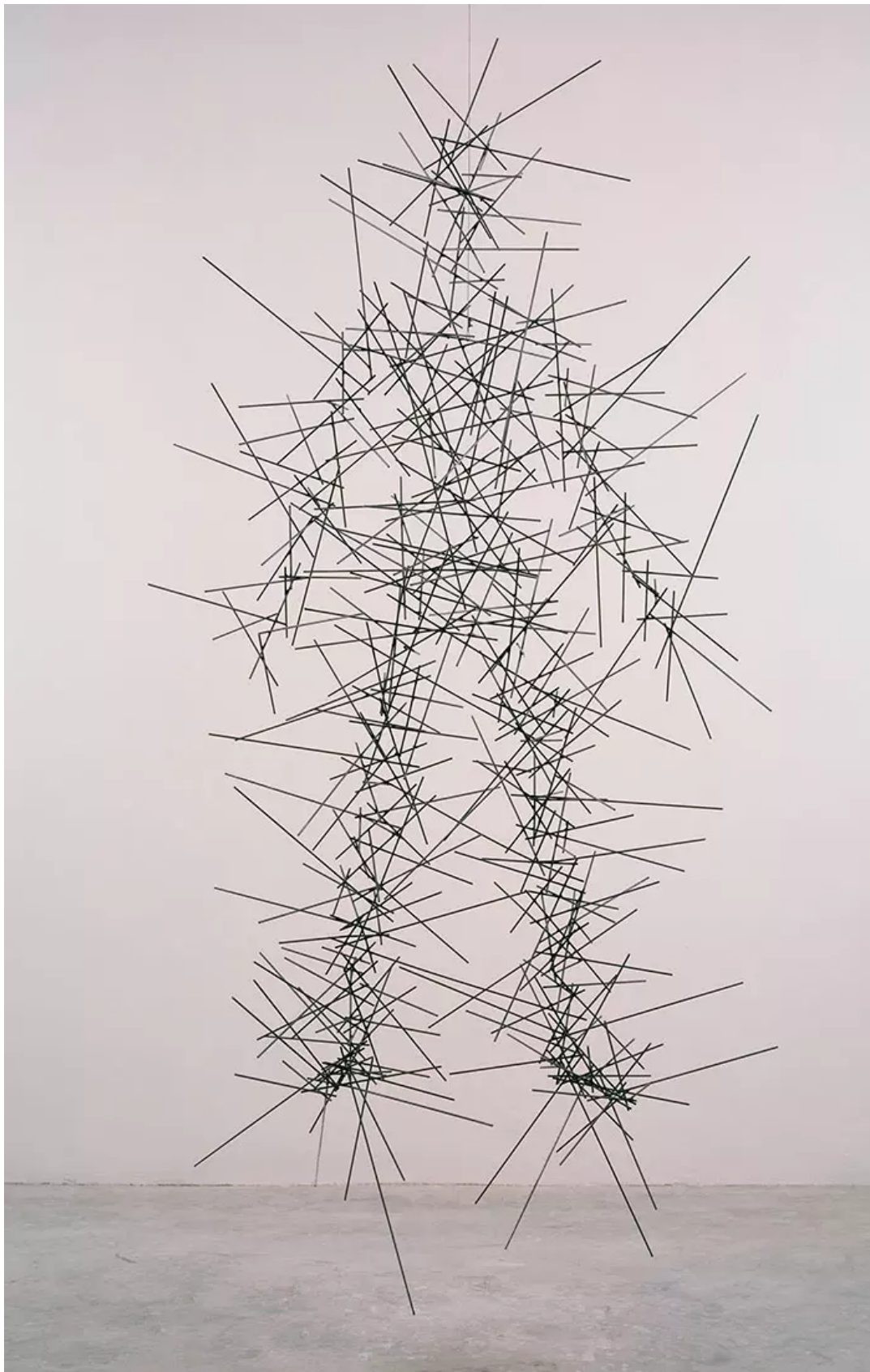
“It wasn’t a eureka moment,” he explains. More of a philosophical process of elimination: the search for artistic truth, he decided, was “no longer about metaphysical aspirations or formal conceptual strategies”. It was about where he lived: inside his own body.



'Distress' (2001) © Stephen White/Antony Gormley

The challenge he set himself was to find a way of portraying the human body, not in the expressionistic manner of his artistic antecedents, but as “a place for dwelling, and for potential transformation”. Here was both a break from art history, and an acknowledgment of its legacy. The body in modernism, as Caiger-Smith writes, had been “subsumed, rendered as metaphor, or simply set aside in favour of other concerns”. Gormley wanted to return it to centre stage. He also wanted to take that stage outside the confines of the gallery. An early work that Gormley defines as key was 1986’s “A View, A Place”, which placed a hollow lead figure on top of a slag heap, looking over a post-industrial landscape. It was commissioned for the Stoke-on-Trent Garden Festival, and it was Gormley’s first body sculpture to be displayed in public.

The artist conceived the piece as a critique of the way the memory of Britain’s manufacturing and industrial history was being “annihilated” in a socially divisive time. The inert figure was originally meant to be carrying a candle, he reveals, but was refashioned to have its arms hanging simply by its side. “It is as if the hands have nothing left to make. There is nothing for them to do.”



'Trajectory Field III' (2002) © Stephen White/Antony Gormley

Gormley says the work was meant to be anti-heroic, and anything but a monument. "It is simply a still moment in a still place. The excuse for sculpture in a digital age is that it says, 'Stop!' It is a palpable thing that you can bump into, and make you take a view." He says the theme of Britain's industrial decline was to be at the centre "of everything that the Angel is meditating upon".



The “angel” is, of course, Gormley’s “Angel of the North” (1998), the giant, arms-outstretched, rusted figure that greets travellers in Gateshead, alongside the Great North Road, which thrust the artist into public prominence. The series of body sculptures that have followed over the years are variations of Gormley’s core theme, which is that his figures should act as a kind of catalyst for the public: “The emotion is not in the work, it is in the viewer,” he says. His early exposure to Indian sculpture (“not about musculature, but acknowledging the zone of the body as a place of primal energy”) was a major influence.



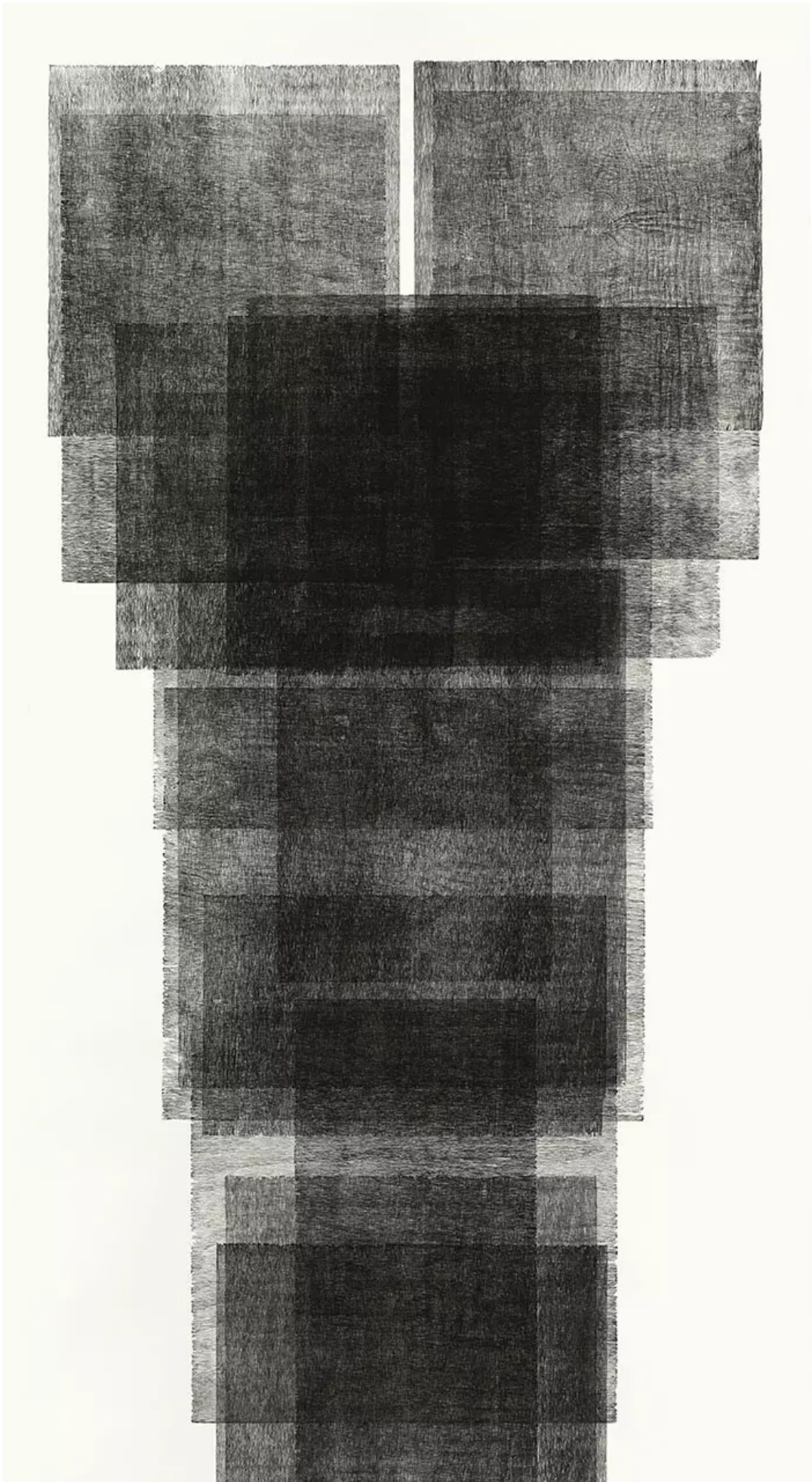




'Bodies in Space I' (2001) © Stephen White/Antony Gormley

And how, I ask him, about western classical art? Is its celebration of the perfectly honed human body, which lasted, on and off, for the best part of two millennia, irrelevant today? “I think that we have lost that innocence,” he replies. “My feeling is that we are much more aware of how liable to breakdown the body is. There is more evidence of the body in decline around.

“The average life expectancy in Periclean Athens, for those who weren’t slaves, was probably about 40-45 years. Today we are promised 100 years. The degree to which we look death in the face, while in our living bodies, is a very profound difference.”





'Reach' (2016) © Stephen White/Antony Gormley

The counterpoint to Gormley taking his passive, inexpressive figures out into the wider world has been to bring some of the heroic figures of our collective past back, literally, down to earth. In 2011's *Still Standing*, he took some of the prized ancient sculptures of St Petersburg's State Hermitage Museum off their plinths and placed them on the floor. The viewing public "were seeing these very familiar works, which they had seen as untouchable icons, become their friends and neighbours. It was empowering. But also delightful."

## **The commodification of art in our time has removed its identity as Sculptor an experimental zone**

In *One & Other*, commissioned two years previously, he turned the fourth plinth of Trafalgar Square into a stage for a cross-section of the population to use, an hour at a time, as they thought fit. "I plinthed" became the modish slogan of the summer of 2009; Gormley, in the meantime, was distressed about "the inability of the art of our time to reflect the collective

interest, or to test collective values. Walter Benjamin said that modernity meant the end of monuments. But if that means the end of memory, we are completely doomed."

Gormley's work in recent years has focused on science, and in particular quantum physics. Some of his figures have become more abstract, created in accordance with their inner construction: "Our understanding of what a piece of granite is very different to that of the Egyptians," he says.

He describes himself as a "passionate amateur" who has much in common with scientists. "I see [them] as explorers too. Yes, they use deductive and experimental reasoning, but at the same time they also use intuition. Einstein without his violin is no Einstein." He describes a current commission for the Niels Bohr Institute in Copenhagen as "the most exciting context you can make contemporary art for — an intellectual community which is thinking about the nature of matter".





Work in progress for 'Critical Mass II' (1995) © Elfi Tripamer

A pet project to send one of his bodies into space — “nobody needs to see it, it would just be the fact of its being there” — foundered when Nasa declined to co-operate. He fears that art, back on planet Earth, has lost some of its inclination to boldly go into uncharted territory. “The commodification of art in our time has removed its identity as an experimental zone. But the taste [among the public] to participate is growing, and that is a wonderful thing.”

With our conversation ending on a high note, we take another, more leisurely walk around the studio. Much of the projects are devoted to a major exhibition of Gormley’s work at the Royal Academy in 2019. One of its principal pieces will be a series of narrow, parallel passageways that will use light, and the flow of visitors, to explore “what we have become in order to survive in the megalopolis. How do we protect our sense of self, and learn how to ignore others? I’m quite interested in that.”

The story so far is . . . that there is a lot more to come.

*Martin Caiger-Smith's definitive monograph, 'Antony Gormley', is published by Rizzoli on October 27*

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*Photographs: Lydia Goldblatt; Stephen White/Antony Gormley; Elfi Tripamer*

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