

High concept

Antony Gormley's much-travelled iron figures have landed in the Alps - and, he tells Peter Aspden, their life is just beginning

Here they are again: Antony Gormley's life-sized, cast iron figures, like curious aliens savouring the latest stage of their package tour of earthly delights, have found a new place to park their inert bodies. High in a mountain pasture in the Austrian Alps, 100 of these unblinking figures bear witness to a new and dramatically different landscape. They have waded into the seas in Norwegian fjords, stood beside marble senators on a Roman site overlooking the Mediterranean, and infiltrated some of the densest habitats on the planet - London, Manhattan - neutrally watching the busy movements of anxious populations. But the air is cleaner here, the scents more fragrant. If it is to be their final adventure, as their creator insists, they will surely speak well of the world in their indeterminate futures.

But what will the world make of them? That is the point of "Horizon Field", the latest instalment in Gormley's sculptural "experiment" that asks the grandiose question: "Where does the human project fit within the evolution of life on this planet?" The answer, the sculptor emphasises, does not reside in these still figures. The project was not completed with the installation of the last body into the verdant landscape, he says; it was only just started. Now comes the interesting part: "the looking, the finding, the not-finding," says Gormley. "The relationship between something you can touch, something you can see, something you can imagine."

Gormley is, as ever, in philosophical frame of mind as he addresses a cramped press conference in a chalet in the Kriegeralpe, near the town of Lech, to mark the opening of "Horizon Field". The work has been commissioned by the nearby Kunsthhaus Bregenz, whose former director, Eckhard Schneider, pays tribute to the artist's ambition. "He is an artist who is always chasing himself. He never finds boundaries acceptable."

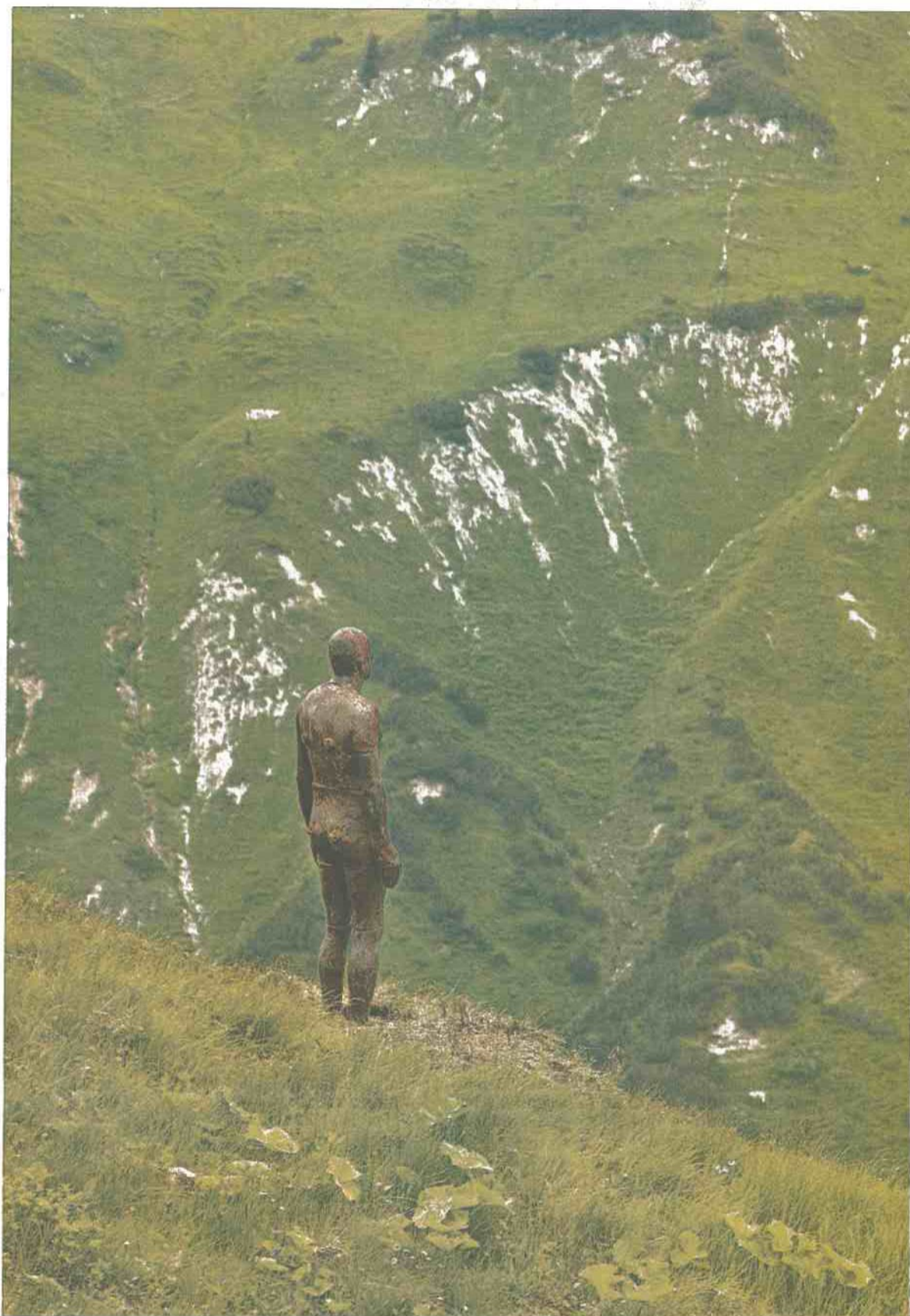
That trait is in evidence in Gormley's response to being chosen to give next year's BBC Radio 4 Reith lectures, which is announced today. He is the first visual artist or sculptor to do the prestigious series, and he typically plans to give the corporation a logistical headache or two by wanting to deliver the four lectures in different locations: London and New York, and a couple of not necessarily user-friendly destinations yet to be decided. His theme will be "Art as Survival" and he intends the talks to be the "intellectual complement" to "Horizon Field".

Back in the Alpine chalet, as stuffed owls look on, Gormley continues his exposition for the journalists who have gathered from all over Europe for the occasion. He says that the project, which will last for two years, can be seen as a European reply to the "great tradition of land art which started in the US in the 1960s".

The figures in "Horizon Field", cast replicas of the artist's own body, stretch over an area of 150 sq km, and they all stand at a height of 2,039 metres. "They are embedded within the landscape, not attempting to be part of the domestic world, nor the world of extreme altitude, but somewhere in between," says Gormley. "They are a mediation between the domestication of the valleys and the idea of the peak."

He describes this as an "environmental project", but not a polemic. Gormley is too nuanced in his views to thump tubs with his work, although he does manage to inject improbable urgency when he tells his audience that "we arrived 140,000 years ago, we have 6bn years left. Can we now achieve a sustainable form of life that balances culture and nature?"

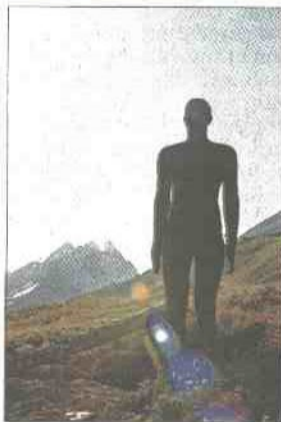
The ambivalent relationship between the figures and the landscape goes part of the way to answering this epic question. Some of the iron bodies will become landmarks



for the region's many skiers and hikers. Others will be unapproachable, though visible. They look in all directions, although they never face each other. This is in sharp contrast to "Event Horizon", Gormley's related installation in London, where all the figures looked from their urban perches towards the Hayward Gallery's sculpture court.

The effect in London was one of surveillance and paranoia. You could never get away from the gaze of the unmoving watchers. Here in the high Alps of Vorarlberg, by contrast, they will be subjected to the forces of nature. In winter some will be covered by snow. Humanity is humbled here, rendered powerless.

This is the latest chapter in Gormley's



Anti-heroes
"Horizon Field" by Antony Gormley consists of 100 sculptures spread over 150 sq km in the Austrian Alps
Markus Treitler



gradual deconstruction of the heroic ideal in art, and particularly his own art, sculpture. The return to elemental themes is a repudiation of the muscular torsos and self-congratulatory poses that have dominated the last few hundred years of western art. Their principal theme was the aggrandisement of the human figure, and look where it got us.

The artist is excited by the very vulnerability of his new works. The legacy of modernism, individual artists working silently in cosseted studios, has betrayed the grander purpose of art. "The capability of art to endure, and to be exposed to the elements, has been lost," he says. He uses the image of acupuncture to describe the intended effect of his figures: "to activate a potential within the landscape, but also within us".

The "field" described in the work's title is similarly multi-layered in its intentions. "It is suggestive of an open space where things might grow. It is a field of research, of inquiry, of possibility, of energy," says Gormley, relishing the switch from literal to metaphorical meanings.

He describes the practical difficulties in creating the work. He enlisted the help of the Austrian army, 15 mountain rescue teams, numerous volunteers. "In one day we put up 43 sculptures with the help of 150 people in eight hours," he says. "As a young artist, I could never have imagined something like this happening."

The educational outreach programme of the Kunsthhaus Bregenz is looking a little different too. There is "Iron Man, Speak!", a project inviting young people to invent monologues for the figures, under the guidance of the author Daniela Egger. The area's many hiking tours, in the meantime, will inevitably take on a more philosophical bent. "Here Comes the Sun" is a trek for early-morning risers, taking in dawn and breakfast. Gormley is surely right in

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saying that the life of "Horizon Field" begins right now.

A few days after our return from the Alps, Gormley talks over the telephone about next year's Reith lectures, in which many of the themes of "Horizon Field" will be teased out. "We have been hijacked by the idea of art as a specialisation. I believe it isn't," he asserts. "The 20th century privatised art, left it in the hands of experts and institutions. Is it possible to open it up again?"

Gormley's fluent and taxing allocutions often end in a question. Perhaps more than any other artist, his work has in recent years assumed the guise of an ongoing philosophical inquiry, never more explicitly than in "One & Other", in which members of the public occupied the fourth plinth of Trafalgar Square for an hour at a time, creating a democratic tableau vivant of shifting human concerns.

His Reith talks will continue on the theme of the demise of heroism. "The idea of the statue acting as a public statement of value, the idealisation of the hero, or of perfect beauty - all that is over," he says. Art has new challenges: "We are in a digital age in which all imagery is instantly communicable, extinguishable, replaceable. We live so much in the virtual world. Sculpture is atavistic, resisting the speed of the meta-world we have created. It insists on first-hand experience, of the perception of things as they are."

The last lecture will talk of another anachronism: the artist as the focus of protest or propaganda. "I want to explode that dialectic. In the present scheme of things, artists who would have been considered dissident have become mass-marketed."

But that note of cynicism should not be taken for cosmic pessimism. Gormley believes that art is becoming more, rather than less, important in the social fabric of the world. National politics have let us down, religious views have become ever more extreme; it is up to art, he says, to become a space that "tables human futures", that prompts reflection. In the summer Alpine skies, the hills are alive with the sound of humanity questioning its very purpose.

'Horizon Field', until April 2012. For information go to www.kunsthhaus-bregenz.at

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