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## The iron men

Antony Gormley explains why he has spent the past five years on a project to erect Horizon Field, 100 sculptures of his body, in the Austrian alps

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Antony Gormley  
The Guardian, Saturday 7 August 2010

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Figure in a landscape . . . part of Antony Gormley's Horizon Field, near Lech in the Austrian Alps. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

It started as a whim and ended up taking five years.

Last Sunday morning a band of assorted folk set out on a walk across the base of Mohnenfluh in the Bregenzerwald. The 2,544m mountain is at the centre of a high dilution of sculpture, over a wide and varied field of alpine meadows that catch the slanting sunlight and seem to be made of a deep velvet; gypsum sinks that hide micro-climates of secret ferns where greedy flies suck the nectar from the heavy heads of cow parsley; bright streams that run from the ice-melt into shining falls that turn the grey schist black; deep forests of high-reaching pine; and among the craggy heights the occasional glimpse of ibex or wild sheep. It was a bright morning, the sky a deep blue, the air clear and completely still, given depth by the dull clonking of cow-bells on the udder-stretched alpage-grazers: subtly beige-shaded Braunvieh who with their big brown eyes occasionally left off their chomping to stare at us. High above are the peaks – occasionally shadowed by cloud but mostly sharply outlined against the infinite blue.

In the summer of 2005, at the invitation of Eckhard Schneider, of the Kunsthaus Bregenz, my wife Vicken and I went to wander in the mountains of Vorarlberg to see if it was possible to install a

multiple-body work there. We stayed in a wooden house in Sonnendach above Bezau on top of a cellar filled with Bergkäse. A man called Winfried came every two days at dawn to wash the cheeses with salt and turn them over. There was something immediately euphoric about the silence and clear air of those days spent walking. I didn't realise then that the project we were beginning would take so long to finish.

*Horizon Field* comprises 100 iron body forms, weighing 630kg each, spread over seven valleys and 150 square kilometres at a height of 2,039m, creating a field that makes its own horizon, the last of my attempts to ask a simple question in material terms: "Where does the human being fit in the scheme of things"? In 1997 I made *Another Place* for the Wattenmeer, the extensive tide plane of Cuxhaven, as part of an exhibition organised by Schneider (then of the Kunsthaus Hannover) and 10 years later, I installed *Event Horizon* in London, which this spring moved to New York; 31 sculptures: four on the ground and 27 against the skyline. By now placing this work in the geological frame of the mountains I wanted to contrast the flat, uninscribed horizon of the sea and the high-density high-rise populated world of New York with this installation in the vastness of the western Austrian Alps: where the Widderstein, Kanisfluh, Kriegerhorn and Ohmeshorn peaks would become the context for this last "field".

Sculpture doesn't need a roof or a label. You don't need to pass over the threshold of an institution in order to experience something that engages your imagination and, with luck, your body. When placed in the outdoors in rain and sunshine, in summer and winter, in daylight and moonlight, sculpture, in my view, begins to live and its silence becomes a potent marker in time and space. People may well ask "What the hell is this thing doing here?" and the work returns that question and it responds reflexively "What the hell are you doing here?"

Vicken and I found the height for the work on the last day of our stay in 2005: Seekopf, a small grassy mound to the west of Widderstein. It was in the middle but above the tree line, neither high nor low, nor in the inhabited valleys, nor on the cross-topped peaks. Here the work could be embedded and lost in space. It could make implicit its horizon, but it would always need seeking out, needing the active looking and perhaps not finding of its walking, thinking, feeling viewer/participants. I love the way the work looks when it is wet from rain, when it stands as a dark silhouette against a field of newly made snow, when it is dried and rusty standing red against the blue of an alpine sky and exposed not only to the elements but also to the imaginations of those who come across it.

*Horizon Field* was realised after 17 different proposal maps and more than 2 years of negotiation with environment agencies, local hunters and farmers, ski resort owners, mountaineers and the village pasturage associations, so last weekend there was a lot to celebrate.

Among the walkers on that Sunday morning after the official opening were Ewald and Artur, two locals who were intimately connected with the project. Ewald, a 40-year-old climber from Egg (a village 50km down the road) drafted the maps for the project. He is a brilliant skier but also knows the mountains better than I know the London Tube. Ewald plays the trumpet and the cornet in the Egg brass band, smokes 40 Marlboro a day, has nut-coloured skin and likes schnapps and the local brown beer. He works for the Voralberger Kraftwerke (VKW), the local hydro-electric company, who by default became a sponsor of the project.

Artur is somewhat older but with a similar high-altitude energy. He is the *Geschäftsführer* of the museums and theatre in Bregenz who became the chief coordinator of *Horizon Field* after the initiator of the project, Eckhard, suddenly got a new job in Kiev. Luckily, as it happened, he had also worked for Michi Manhart, the local hunter, farmer, landowner and ski-lift owner who, over the course of time, decided that 100 iron men was just what the mountains around the Ohmeshorn needed. So long as the helicopters installing them did not disturb the deer that he intended to shoot.

Michi once told me that he could take a Heckler and Koch P7 pistol with 9mm parabellum calibre bullet and shoot eight targets at a 15m range in 4.5 seconds. *Geschäftsführer* or not, without Michi's help Artur could not get anywhere. Artur is a keen "constellation theory" psychologist and over quite a few bottles of the local Blaufränkisch imbibed over the past two years has subtly intimated how he has engaged the theory in the pursuit and practice of the project.

Artur brought on board Marcel Strolz to co-ordinate the installation, but he ended up doing much of the work himself. Marcel is the cousin of Daniel and son of Othmar Strolz, the famous mountain guide, and is an avalanche hunter, bringing down dangerous avalanches before they can kill anyone by shooting them either with pre-laid charges or rockets from afar. Like Ewald he knows the mountains well and is technically gifted. Artur, Marcel and Ewald are all accomplished skiers and together we scoped the ski-fields last winter to see how the work might exist with the pistes and snow. Also instrumental were Günther Schneider and Marcel's brother Georg, head of the mountain-rescue team and at whose hotel, full of clocks telling different times, wound daily by Othmar, we lodged. In the end all the mountain-rescue teams of the Lech and Klösterle joined in and 22 army engineers from the Bregenz division of the Austrian army helped. During one day in early June, 120 people installed 43 works in eight hours. That is what constellation theory can bring: supreme coordination.

It's a bloody miracle it happened. Not only did these people with their values and pragmatism and solid mountain attitude allow this nut from London to put 100 iron copies of himself all over their backyard, but they actually helped to achieve it. The opening saw 1,500 people up the Kriegeralpe with the Shoppernaut band playing local tunes and Philip Lingg and his father Anton in their lederhosen singing in close harmony under the big wooden cross. What can all this mean? For me this was proof that art can be made and achieved collectively, and perhaps more importantly, that the social dimension of a landscape cannot be separated from that landscape.

All of the sculptures I have placed within this social and geological landscape are made from inside, from the other side of appearance, celebrating a moment of being in time. They are my attempts to immerse myself in the stillness and silence of sculpture in the belief that we need these qualities in a time in which everything is erasable and instantly replaceable. Sculpture can turn us back to the primacy of first-hand experience rather than the mediated world of our built habitat. It was a pleasure to work with informed people in a close community, proud of its past, protective of its ways and means, but also completely connected to the wider world. So many of us spend much of our time dealing with a meta-world of interpreted experience brought to us through our iPhones and laptops and through the windows of our high-rise condominiums. To work in a tough, but vital place where people still make things (the contemporary Vorarlberg wooden architecture and furniture is strong and uncompromising, built on a 700-year tradition of woodwork) was a tonic.

The Walsers came to this cold, inaccessible part of Austria in the first years of the 14th century,

having previously been given asylum by Simon de Montfort. In those early years they suffered from the high altitude, the short growing season and the difficulty of communication and supply. The survival skills and self-reliance they learned then are still present in the character of the people in spite of their home becoming a world-renowned ski destination. I was privileged to work with them; I may have provided the model for the bodies but they have made them their own.

[www.kunsthhaus-bregenz.at/horizonfield/](http://www.kunsthhaus-bregenz.at/horizonfield/)

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