

# Public Works



**Anish Kapoor**

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***Non-Object (Plane), 2010***

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**A Percent-for-Art Commission for  
the Ray and Maria Stata Center**

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**Architect: Gehry Partners  
MIT Building 32**



## Object as Threshold

*They are all about something here, which is something inside, something not here. That process seems to happen with emptying things out, making things voided. That seems to actually fill them up. Emptying them out is just filling them up.*<sup>1</sup>

—Anish Kapoor

We enter the TSMC Lobby of the Ray and Maria Stata Center drawn through its doors by a radiant slash of steel glowing like liquid light—a sculpture, *Non-Object (Plane)* by the artist Anish Kapoor. This object, sixteen feet high and a little over seven feet wide, seems weightless as it leans effortlessly against the wall, its seamless, highly polished silver surface animated by a rippling, constantly shifting composition. Shapes without names, twizzling lines, frayed patches of color: the reflective plane is an artwork in the process of continual becoming. One moment it evokes the dynamic gestures of abstract expressionism, the next, the quietude of a simple drawing. When a momentary stillness is suddenly punctuated by the staccato movement of passersby, the acceleration of traffic in the street outside, it is cinematic. If we lie on our backs and look upward and past Kapoor's sculpture we watch a swath of sky float across the clerestory windows. In the mirrored object the swath becomes a changing palette of endless blues. We seem to float upward and through the tilted surface into, what? What is above, behind, and beyond the frame?

Kapoor's reflective surface also demands interaction. We move towards the mirror. As we step towards it, we are compressed, expanded, fragmented, inverted. We step sideways. Stunned, we watch our image slowly dissipate and then, finally, disappear. We feel a disconnection between what our body is experiencing and what logic dictates. Before the sleek gleaming surface, what is moving? Our body, the object, the room, the sky, the street? What is still? What does it mean to be still? Is the movement from without or within? What is this space? What is this convex work of mirror-polished stainless steel that has its own logic and that subverts the normal order of things? What does our interaction with this object make possible for us?

Our encounter with Kapoor's sculpture requires us to step outside time, to linger and consider its ultimate logic: to confront the experience of our own disappearance and what that means. Like a *vanitas* still life, the slow inevitable loss of our image is a reminder of our mortality. As the image withdraws from the mirror, we also experience a de-privileging of the self. We are sucked into a bigger space that is greater than we can comprehend, its emptiness dissolving us and even rejecting us. Call it Buddhist, call it poetic, call it existentialist, or metaphysical. We feel overwhelming anxiety and vertigo mixed with awe when faced by the force and magnitude of unfathomable beauty. Whatever you call it, and the work of Anish Kapoor has been called all of these, we are led to this precipice of ambivalence by our bodily experience of his objects.

Beginning with his earliest works, Kapoor's sculptures, whether fabricated of raw pigment, wax, stone, or polished metals, could be termed "objects-as-thresholds." While encouraging us to interact with them physically, whether on walls or floors, in galleries or churches, in Rockefeller Plaza or Chicago's Millennium Park, they confound our analyses of these experiences in order to contradict

our assumptions deliberately. We may revel in the playfulness and mindfulness of our experiences but what these encounters do most is lead us to question. How have we constructed our reality? What is our self-positioning within this construction? What are its limits? How might we transcend them? To what end? What happens to our body as a result?

Born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, Kapoor moved to London in 1973 to study art. After returning to India in 1979, he began to create now iconic works such as *1000 Names* (1979–1980), whose strong geometric forms, related to monumental architecture such as minarets, obelisks, pyramids, pillars, ziggurats, spires, and domes, are made of pure, saturated, powdered pigments. Scattered seemingly at random on the gallery floor, the forms seem to contain spaces radiant and alive from within. However, the fragility of the powdery materials contradicts this assumption. One slip of a foot or a slight breeze and the forms could be blown away, buried under the colored sand like ancient temples beneath a desert landscape. The solidity of architecture becomes merely a lexicon of forms, building blocks with the potential for constructing an experience of another place, someplace beyond rational cognition.

Many of Kapoor's forms have continued to be derived from this architectural lexicon reduced to their essence: S- and C-shaped curves, convex and concave disks, cylinders, cubes, upright rectangles, hexagons, and squares. Their simplicity is a foil for a complex layering of associations that shift with the context in which they are presented. Despite the new life a work may take on in a different space, what remains the same is its relationship to the body. Indeed, many of his works have assumed evocative organic shapes or have been given titles that remind us that these abstract objects exist within real space but assume their deepest meaning when we internalize and reflect upon our body's experiences of them. The artwork becomes, and therefore calls to, the human body. The shapes and behavior of the surfaces of *Suck* (1998) and *Turning the World Inside Out II* (1995) suggest, at once, whirlpools or navels; *When I Am Pregnant* (1992), the sensual swell of a belly or an erect nipple; *Making the World Many* (1997), a dense mass of polyps or breasts rounded forms reminiscent of the ancient Roman multi-breasted statues of Artemis; and the red lacquered *7 Ways In* (2000), a bodily orifice or, perhaps, a birth canal perhaps an embodied aperture. When Kapoor uses the color red, the sculpture takes on its ubiquitous association with blood, an association that is used explicitly in some of his titles, as in *Blood Mirror* (2000), *Blood Oval* (2001), and *Turning Water Into Mirror Blood Into Sky* (2003), a pool-like piece suggestive of a baptismal font, once installed in a Roman-inspired courtyard at the National Archaeological Museum in Naples.

Kapoor's objects suggest the fullness and emptiness that are simultaneously present in all things, literally their being and nothingness. In *Cloud Gate* (2004), the city of Chicago becomes simultaneously more and less itself. Each day thousands of people



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1, 2  
*Cloud Gate*, 2004  
 Stainless steel  
 10 x 20.1 x 12.8 m  
 Millennium Park, Chicago  
 Photo: Patrick Pyszka  
 Courtesy of the City of Chicago and Gladstone Gallery

3  
*Turning the World Inside Out*, 1995  
 Stainless steel  
 148 x 184 x 188 cm  
 Photo: John Riddy, London  
 Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

4  
*C-Curve*, 2007  
 Stainless steel  
 2.2 x 7.7 x 3 m  
 Kensington Gardens, 2010–11  
 Photo: Tim Mitchell  
 Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

5  
*Sky Mirror*, 2006  
 Stainless steel  
 Diameter 10 m  
 Kensington Gardens, 2010–11  
 Photo: Tim Mitchell  
 Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery

6  
*Turning the World Inside Out II*, 1995  
 Chromed bronze  
 180 x 180 x 130 cm  
 Installation view: Fondazione Prada, Milan, 1995–96  
 Collection: Fondazione Prada, Milan  
 Photo: Attilio Maranzano  
 Courtesy of the artist and Fondazione Prada

move around and through this 110-ton elliptical “bean” form so that it quickly became absorbed into the experience of everyday life in its location, Millennium Park. Watching it change with the time of year, the time of day, with the seasons and weather, it can never be experienced the same way twice and neither the sculpture nor the iconic downtown skyline reflected in its surface can ever become too familiar. Any familiarity is further destabilized by the experience of standing beneath the interior *omphalos*, or navel, where we see our reflections shattered into infinity. This gate does not lead any place, but it cannot be said to lead nowhere at all. Where does it lead? Kapoor’s choice of the image of a cloud underscores that this object, and we who are experiencing it, are, like a city, in a state of permanent flux. The ultimate threshold, *Cloud Gate* is a space for being and for becoming. It is no place, while containing all space.

One of the great achievements of Kapoor’s *Non-Object (Plane)*, commissioned for the Frank Gehry-designed Stata Center, is how he internalizes the thrust of Gehry’s architectural vocabulary by using his sculpture as a threshold for getting inside Gehry’s sensibility. Leave Kapoor’s mirror-void and move through and outside Gehry’s

Stata Center. Like Kapoor’s sculpture, Gehry’s building follows its own rules. In fact, we could even describe the result of his signature asymmetries, undulating materials, shifts in scale, and bold palette as an inhabitable sculpture. Kapoor and Gehry take pleasure in the magic and pleasure of surfaces. The Stata Center’s sheathing, the building’s metallic skin, also reflects our image again and again. It distorts the image of the body as we are magnified and then diminished by its baroque curves jutting into space. It is as though we are now literally inside Kapoor’s sculpture.

By effectively turning the building inside out, Kapoor introduces an unexpected dimension into Gehry’s playful architecture—that the physical process of living with Gehry’s ironic spaces corresponds to an internal process. For the viewer, as for the artist, the engagement with space is an opportunity to delve into the self, to experience something of what is beyond the self.

Lisa G. Corrin

**Anish Kapoor** is one of the most influential sculptors of his generation. Born in 1954 in Bombay, he has lived in London since the early 1970s. Over the past twenty years he has exhibited extensively with solo shows at venues including: Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland; Tate, London; Reina Sofia, Madrid; and Haus der Kunst, Munich. In 2009 he was the first living artist to have a solo exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art in London and in 2010 he had his first major exhibition in India. The artist has participated in many group shows internationally including those at: Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; Serpentine Gallery, London, documenta IX, Kassel, Germany; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. He represented Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1990, where he was awarded the Premio Duemila Prize, and in 1991 he received the prestigious Turner Prize. Among his major permanent public commissions are: *Cloud Gate* (2004) for Millennium Park, Chicago; *Dismemberment Site I* (2003–2009) for the sculpture park The Alan Gibbs Farm, Kaipara Bay, New Zealand; and *Temenos* (2010) for Tees Valley, Middlesbrough, UK. In 2010 Kapoor was awarded with Cecil Balmond the commission for *Orbit*, a permanent public artwork for the 2012 Olympic Park, London.  
[www.anishkapoor.com](http://www.anishkapoor.com)

**Lisa Grazioplene Corrin** is Ellen Philips Katz Director of the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art and a Senior Lecturer in Art History at Northwestern University. She was previously Director of the Williams College Museum of Art and Deputy Director of Art and Chief Curator at the Seattle Art Museum, where she served as the artistic lead for the city's Olympic Sculpture Park. From 1997 to 2001 Corrin was Chief Curator at the Serpentine Gallery, London. Corrin began her museum career as the first curator of the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, a nomadic museum without walls. Since then, she has curated over sixty exhibitions including innovative reinstallations of collections that brought together contemporary art and artists with historic objects. She has published widely on contemporary art, public art, and museology, including *Mining the Museum* (awarded the Wittenborn Prize) on artist Fred Wilson's eponymous landmark installation and a monograph on artist Mark Dion. Corrin has been a Clark Research Fellow at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute and a Visiting Scholar in Museum Studies at New York University.

**About Public Art at MIT:** MIT's Percent-for-Art program allots funds to commission or purchase art for each new major renovation or building project. The initiative was begun in 1968 and is the oldest percent-for-art program at a private institute of higher education in the US. The program formalized MIT's practice of supporting collaborations between artists and architects on campus: When architect Eero Saarinen designed the MIT Chapel in 1955, sculptor Theodore Roszak created the bell tower and sculptor Harry Bertoina the altar screen.

One of the country's renowned public art commissions was created when architect I. M. Pei and artists Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner collaborated on MIT's 1985 Percent-for-Art program for the Wiesner Building, home to the MIT List Visual Arts Center. Other Percent-for-Art works have been commissioned or purchased from artists including Martin Boyce, Cai Guo-Qiang, Mark di Suvero, Jackie Ferrara, Dan Graham, Candida Höfer, Sol LeWitt, Louise Nevelson, Jorge Pardo, Matthew Ritchie, and Sarah Sze.

Anish Kapoor was selected as artist for the project by a committee of MIT faculty and staff that included: Arne Abramson, Director of Projects for Facilities; Charles Correa, Architect; Jane Farver, Director of the MIT List Visual Arts Center; Frank Gehry, Architect; John Guttag, Dugald C. Jackson Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science; Nancy Joyce, Project Manager for Facilities; Bill Mitchell, Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning; Phillip Sharp, Institute Professor and Professor of Biology; Robert Silbey, Dean of the School of Science; Mriganka Sur, Head of the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences and Paul E. Newton Professor of Neuroscience; Chris Terman, Co-Director of the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory and Senior Lecturer; and Susumu Tonegawa, Director of the Riken-MIT Center for Neural Circuit Genetics and Picower Professor of Biology and Neuroscience. MIT List Visual Arts Center Public Art Curator Patricia Fuller oversaw the project.

The artwork was made possible by MIT Percent-for-Art Funds and generous gifts from an anonymous donor; the Robert ('64) and Sara-Ann Sanders family; the David W. Bermant Foundation: Color, Light, Motion; and Julian Cherubini ('57).

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Cover:  
Anish Kapoor, *Non-Object (Plane)*, 2010  
Stainless steel  
487.68 x 213.36 cm  
MIT Ray and Maria Stata Center, TSMC Lobby  
Commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art Funds and generous gifts from an anonymous donor; the Robert ('64) and Sara-Ann Sanders family; the David W. Bermant Foundation: Color, Light, Motion; and Julian Cherubini ('57)  
Photos: Patrick Gillooly/MIT  
Courtesy of the artist and MIT