

ANISH KAPOOR

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# A Word in the Giant's Ear

KURT W. FORSTER

We have become accustomed to the fact that sculpture has climbed off its pedestal and spread about. Decades ago, Land Art appropriated the full-scale landscape and the long shot (for which reason it also insisted on the aerial view). Today we look at sculpture neither with the eyes of Alberto Giacometti, who you might say devoured it from the depths of the gaze, nor with those of David Smith, who set its parts into dancing motion. Sculpture has long since taken a firm stand with a spectrum ranging from Richard Serra's freestanding walls of steel to Dan Flavin's vibrant, colored stelae. The contrast between tons of heavy steel and luminous gases, between material density and optical wavelengths not only fuels the debate on the essence of sculpture versus image; it also recalls controversies about the nature of light and the mechanics of perception.

Around 1980, Anish Kapoor showed sculptures that produced a strange effect due to the texture of their colored surfaces. In the years that followed, he rounded their forms or carved hollows into stone. Sometimes polished to a high gloss or dyed a strong color, they absorb the light or refract it in diagrammatic form. Funnel-shaped recesses in stones, walls,



ANISH KAPOOR, *UNTITLED*, 2001, marble, 64 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 88 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 49 $\frac{5}{8}$ "  
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York /  
*OHNE TITEL*, Marmor, 164 x 225,2 x 126,1 cm.

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or even floors pierce the conventional limits of a room and reach out into unforeseeable territories. The gray of a curved recess and reflections on shiny steel yield an optical ambivalence that momentarily generates the same impression achieved by Jean Cocteau in his film *Orphée* (1950) when his figures enter and exit through the quicksilver surface of mirrors. However, since Kapoor's enigmatic hollows share none of Cocteau's obtrusive suggestiveness, they refer much more intensely to the sculptures themselves.

The emptiness around things and the conceivable depth within them collide on reflecting surfaces, besiege the eyes and provoke a disturbing "unease," as Kapoor explains in conversation with Homi Bhabha.<sup>1)</sup> He sees his stones as a substance enriched by time, whose history may be revealed in the process of sculpting.<sup>2)</sup>

Kapoor's surfaces appear unstable; their convex curves or concave funnels make the sculpture look as if it were collapsing in on itself. The immaculate sheen of the steel cubes (UNTITLED, 1997) face viewers like upended sarcophagi with imploding surfaces that elude our visual grasp. Spontaneously we reach out in the vain attempt to rescue them from sinking, but the sculptural shape is in the process of vanishing into an optical maelstrom, as if sucked out of its own body and into a moving exterior. As Homi Bhabha describes it, "A sudden disappearance of surface in a deep, dark hole literally cuts the ground from under our feet."<sup>3)</sup>

The extraordinary suction that emanates from these sculptures and seems almost to devour them is not a consequence of exceptional optical effects that occur only on certain surfaces. Kapoor's objects—this dispassionate designation is perhaps best qualified to capture their ambivalence in a single word—paradoxically find themselves in the act of self-consumption. They articulate the idea of their own depth, even where it remains invisible, but also the idea of their own time. It simply takes time to expose oneself to their impact and nothing much may actually happen. Very little does, in fact, happen externally, yet the longer we look, the more we learn from the sculpture. On the other hand, by showing itself to be curiously "curved" in space and time, it denies us some of the ground upon which we presume to be

standing so firmly. The curvature—of surfaces, of reflections, of colors—causes a sense of suspension that is capable of disturbing and even frightening us.

We are certainly not off the mark in assuming that Kapoor's objects create a relation between volume and surface far different from anything we ever learned in school. Instead of subsuming a sculpture's volume to its image, or dulling its body into the appearance of a mere shape, he sets the two into an antagonistic relationship. His objects optically disrupt the relation that furnishes proof of substance and shape, namely the relation of surface to body. Kapoor effectively and literally undercuts the difference between what we explore only with our eyes and what we can grasp only through the physical sense of touch, that is, the hypothesis that sculpture belongs entirely to the world of the viewer. With utmost precision, the continuously curving surfaces of the sculptures transform the traditional relationship of surface and body into a continuum. Their juxtaposition gives rise to a differential linkage. For this reason, their further use should rely increasingly on computer programs capable of calculating an entire bundle of differing algorithms and their interaction. Cecil Balmond, director of the London firm Ove Arup—construction laboratory of contemporary architecture par excellence—put the rule to the test with his models for calculating Kapoor's towering sculptures.

In the year 2000, Kapoor took a giant step when he installed a work in a former flourmill in the port of Newcastle-upon-Tyne: TARATANTARA—a name like a flourish—was "hung" in the hollowed-out shell of a silo. Richard Deacon described it as follows: "The tube of red vinyl stretched between the two remaining standing walls replaced the missing end walls and seemingly converted the building into a block with a hole through it. From the outside, this was fairly simple; one saw the stretched red fabric and anticipated or imagined the mechanics of the installation. Although certainly the continuity of surface between the two ends—the effect of a folding of the outside into a vortex that swept through the building—caused some complications, and the glistening, vibrant surface of the vinyl gleamed with an awesome intensity."<sup>4)</sup> We are overwhelmed not only



*ANISH KAPOOR, UNTITLED, 2003, steel and water, dimensions variable, exhibition "Anish Kapoor," National Archaeological Museum, Naples, 25 October 2003 – 12 January 2004 / OHNE TITEL, Stahl und Wasser, Größe variabel.*

*(PHOTO: PEPPE AVALLONE, NAPOLI)*

*Anish Kapoor*



*ANISH KAPOOR, DESCENT INTO LIMBO, 1992, concrete and stucco, 19<sup>8</sup>/<sub>12</sub> x 19<sup>8</sup>/<sub>12</sub> x 19<sup>8</sup>/<sub>12</sub>"*, Documenta IX, Kassel, 1992, exterior view and interior detail / *EINSTIEG ZUR VORHÖLLE, Beton und Stuck, 6 x 6 x 6 m, Aussenansicht und Innenansicht.*  
*(PHOTO: DIRK DE NEEF, GHENT)*



by the dimensions, corresponding approximately to a ten-storey building, but above all by the link between inside and outside in the form of a fantastically extended tunnel of deep red plastic fabric. Kapoor was again testing the curious power of sculpture that consumes its own volume as well as the room in which it is housed—but this time in gigantic scale. In his own words, “The foreshortening of the building from the outside as one looks through the form is to me, surprising. The building appears to be only half as long as the impression one had of it from the external structure. From the outside of the building, only the inside of the form is visible. From the inside of the building, only the outside of the form is visible. It is as if the space inside the building had suddenly expanded and what was a hole became a form ... Inside and outside seem to be turning into each other.”<sup>5)</sup>

The effect of this gigantic sculpture also rests on the relation of closeness and distance, depending on the position of the viewer and the texture of the material, whose parabolic extension, colors, and effects even managed to surprise Kapoor himself. The surface properties of his materials proved in retrospect to be characteristic and not accidental. As such, they inspired work increasingly removed from the artist’s earlier oeuvre in scale and material. Recently he has begun working with materials that were long alien to sculpture, and in places that are already dominated by mighty buildings.

A high point in Kapoor’s efforts to exceed even the architecture of his sites was reached by the recent installation at London’s Tate Modern, in which trumpet-shaped funnels threatened almost to burst the immense hall. Last year’s MARSYAS installation<sup>6)</sup> is a spatial demonstration of what one might call a visual droning. Created as a kind of two-ended trumpet with a cupola-like opening, it floated above the heads of museum visitors thanks to the resistance of the synthetic material that Kapoor used. The evolution of the largest project to date, whose complexity utterly eclipses the experiment in Newcastle, shows a fascinating combination of visionary idea—captured in small sketches and models—and state-of-the-art, hi-tech engineering. Structural engineer Cecil Balmond tuned himself into Kapoor’s agenda and in his

catalogue essay “Skinning the Imagination,”<sup>7)</sup> he discloses how a highly sophisticated combination of pull, elasticity, and load made it possible to turn forty tons of steel and fabric into a giant sculpture. But MARSYAS does share one thing with the installation in Newcastle: both devour the architecture, calling into question the solid contours and encompassing spaces in the process. What once appeared as a fathomless, wavering field in the depths of the stone, hard as it may be, now deprives viewers of access as infinitely stretching, bending funnels and tunnels of colored fabric. It is inconceivable that architecture, with and of itself, could possibly ever bring about what Kapoor has achieved in his installations: turning space inside out, folding it in on itself and hollowing it out. Such an enterprise requires an imaginative approach of the kind manifested in recent astrophysics—a field concerned with the inaccessibly distant and inconceivably old time-spaces of the universe—by confronting our ordinary three-dimensional world with the idea of the saddle-shaped spaces of string theory. Their visual representation, as also used by Stephen Hawking,<sup>8)</sup> shows impressive affinities with the spatial funnels that Kapoor aspires to. We find comfort in discovering at least one bit of common ground between the incomprehensible, insoluble enigma of Kapoor’s works and the necessity of imagining things we shall never be able to see.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)

1) *Anish Kapoor*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, 1998, with essays by Homi K. Bhabha and Pier Luigi Tazzi (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1998), p. 18: “... in that narrow passage [between the mirrors], paradoxically there is a restlessness, an unease ...”

2) *Ibid.*, p. 27: “There is a history in the stone and through the simple device of excavating the stone it’s just as if a whole narrative sequence is suddenly there ...”

3) *Ibid.*, p. 24.

4) Richard Deacon, “Baltic Anish,” in *Anish Kapoor, TARATAN-TARA* (Barcelona: ACTAR Editorial, 2000), s.p.

5) *Ibid.*, “Anish Kapoor in conversation with Sune Nordgren,” s.p.

6) See *Anish Kapoor, Marsyas*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Publishing, 2002).

7) Cecil Balmond, “Skinning the Imagination,” in *Anish Kapoor, Marsyas*, *ibid.*, pp. 66–69.

8) Cf. Stephen Hawking, *The Universe in a Nutshell* (London: Bantam Press, 2002).