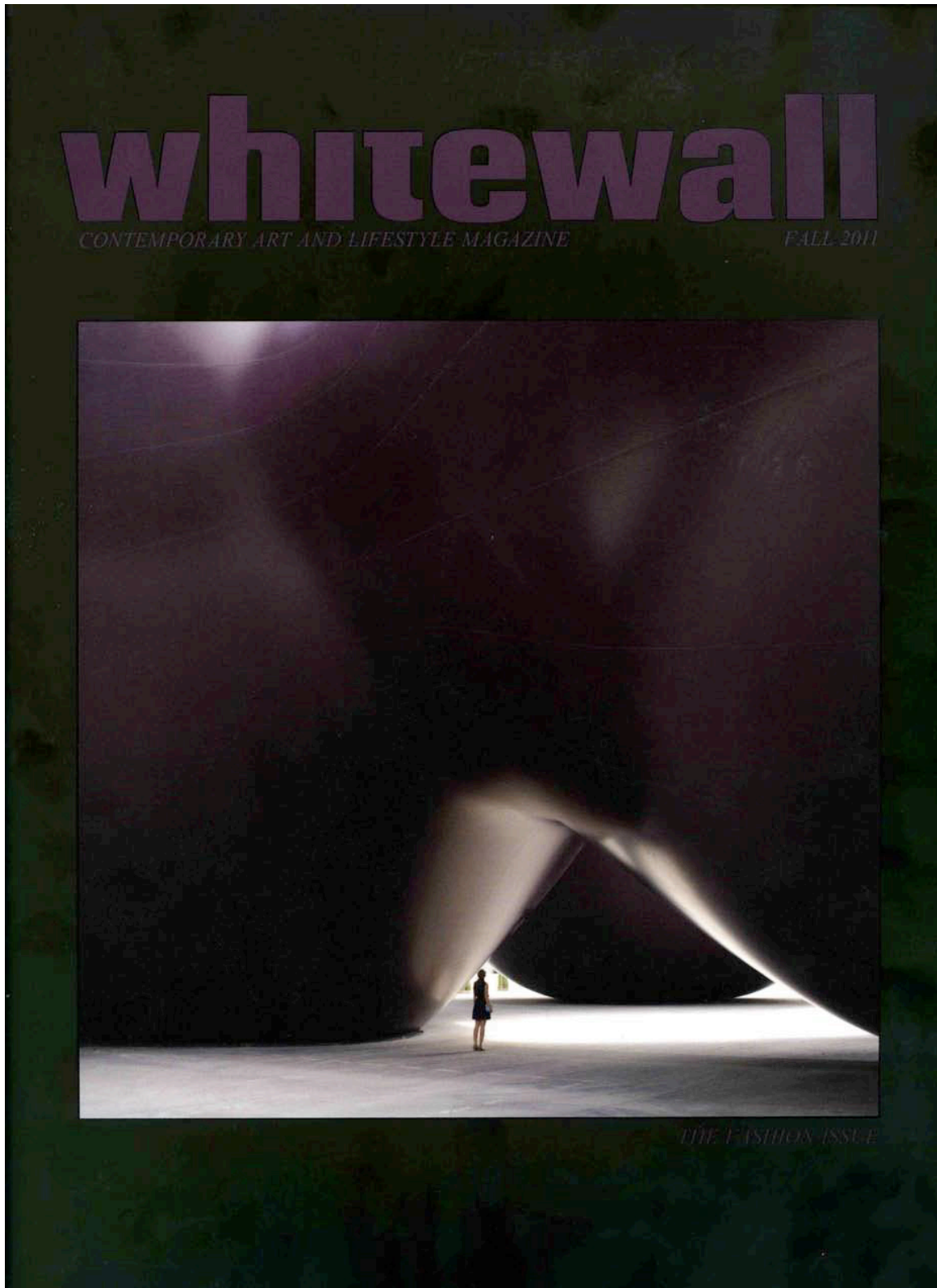


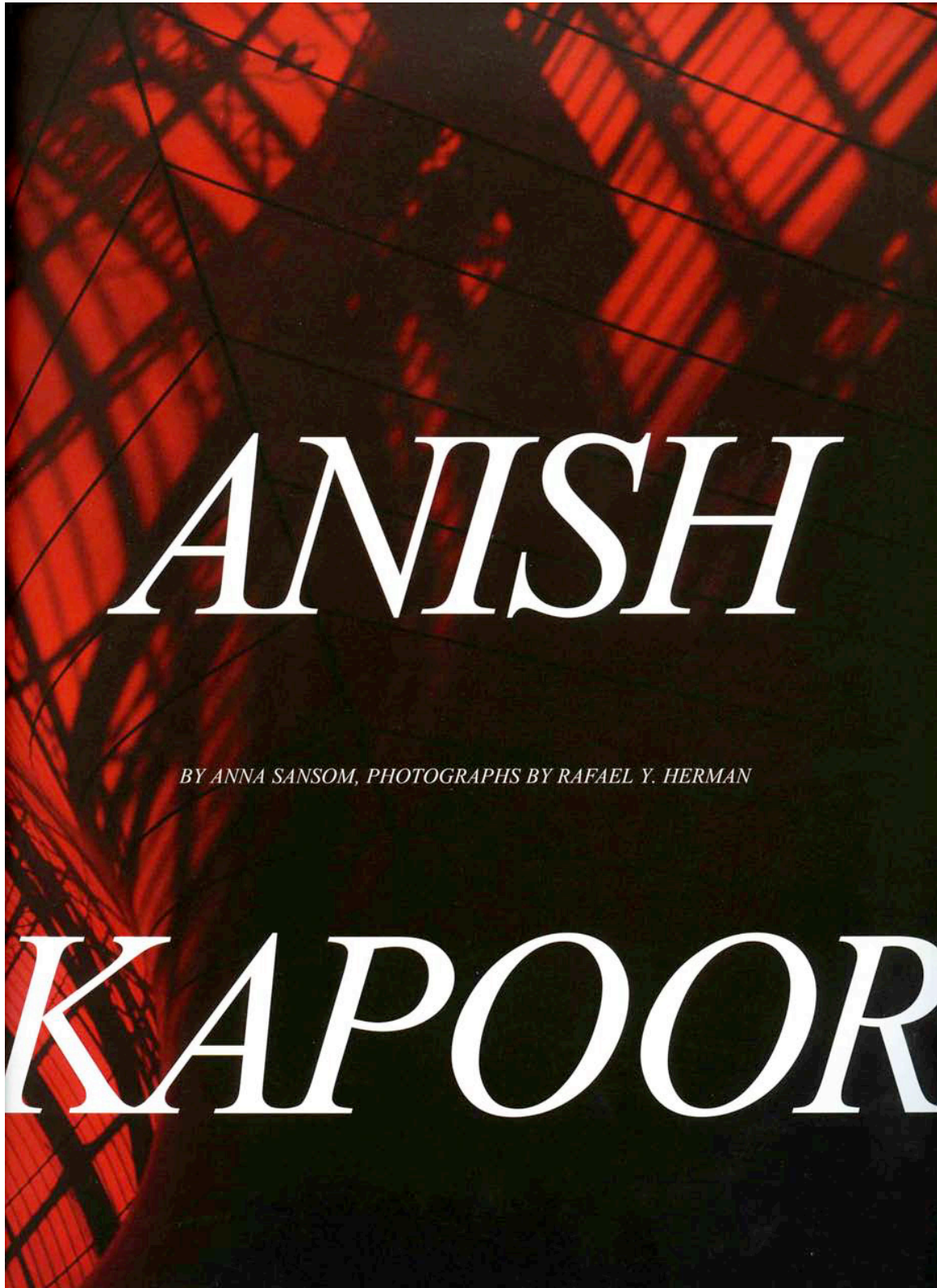
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Anna Sansom. "Anish Kapoor." Whitewall (Fall 2011) pp. 97 -105

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ANISH

BY ANNA SANSOM, PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAFAEL Y. HERMAN

KAPOOR

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At the Grand Palais in Paris last spring, Anish Kapoor's sculpture *Leviathan* created an awe-inspiring experience that offered a new interpretation of the belle époque building. It was the latest edition of Monumenta, the annual five-week-long exhibition that France's culture ministry launched four years ago in which an artist is invited to make an artwork to occupy the nave of the Grand Palais. Kapoor followed Anselm Kiefer, Richard Serra, and Christian Boltanski, but he was the first artist to challenge and truly engage with the Grand Palais' architecture and geometry.

"It was quite a frightening moment to come here and, through Richard Serra's eyes in a way, understand the difficulty of this space," Kapoor says. "I had to form a conceptual model of this building, and the only way to do that was to make one, so I made a model in my studio, as architects do. When I made that first model, I realized that I had to deal with the crystalline light, and that I wanted to turn this building inside out and do a kind of reverse. The idea, almost immediately, was that you enter the object and that somehow the inside and the outside would relate to each other."

"I WANTED TO TURN THIS BUILDING INSIDE OUT AND DO A KIND OF REVERSE. THE IDEA, ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, WAS THAT YOU ENTER THE OBJECT AND THAT SOMEHOW THE INSIDE AND THE OUTSIDE WOULD RELATE TO EACH OTHER"

Security men ushered visitors through black revolving doors into Kapoor's "object," a dark-red monochrome that rose to the 35-meter-high ceiling of the Grand Palais and spread out vertically and horizontally over the 13,500 square meters of the nave. The title of the work was inspired by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes's book, which was published in 1651, and is also named after a biblical sea monster, although in modern Hebrew the word means "whale." In that sense, it recalls the Old Testament story of Jonah and the whale, and how Jonah spent three days in the creature's stomach in order to be protected from the sea's raging storm. "It's like you're entering the belly of the beast and going into the interior of the volume, described by the sculpture," Kapoor says.

The piece's enveloping quality meant that its interior literally swallowed you up. Standing in its middle, you stared into three dark-red rounded spaces — one straight in front, one to the left, and one to the right — that created a feeling of infinity. Made from PVC, it was like a giant balloon that allowed the natural sunlight to filter through, the rays of sun creating grid patterns from the steel framework of the Grand Palais' domed, glass roof on the membrane-surface, as if *Leviathan* were a deep-red canvas for the sun to paint brushstrokes upon. When the sky became overcast, however, it was dark and all-encompassing. "The form brings darkness to the space and the color comes from the idea that red makes a kind of darkness that black or blue cannot, and, of course, I'm making associations with the body very pointedly."

Jean de Loisy, the exhibition's curator, describes *Leviathan* as being "prenatal, like being in the womb," while the

French architect Jean Nouvel talks about it having a "biological dimension." Nouvel adds, "When you first enter, you have a shock. It's the opposite of classical architecture. This interior has no point of reference to the size of the windows, the direction of the light." Conveying the impact of the piece, Nouvel remarks to Kapoor, "You'd be a fantastic architect for spiritual places and you know it!"

After exiting the piece, visitors passed through another door into the Grand Palais, which revealed *Leviathan* from an exterior viewpoint: Here it appeared as four gigantic interlinked bulbous forms in a very deep crimson, an outer-body of the sculpture. "If the work is doing what it is supposed to do, the two experiences don't match each other," Kapoor confirms. "You almost have to make a mental object, which is the desired result of the purpose of this work, and the body is manipulated into moments of entry and moments of exit."

Born in Bombay in 1954 and based in London, Kapoor won the Turner Prize in 1991. Over the last 20 years, his work has been concerned with evoking absence and presence, the idea

of the sublime and spirituality, and of infinity or beyond-ness. "The first void pieces were very simple and hollow; they were full of darkness, so their emptiness in a way became filled up. I was interested in the idea that void is not the same as empty, and that a void is full of material that by its virtue is pregnant. Take that idea further —and it's taken me 20 years to do it — all I've done is reveal the vessel through the architecture."

For Monumenta, Kapoor wanted to create something "complex and complicated"; 150 people were involved in making the piece and seams were constructed to a precision of millimeters.

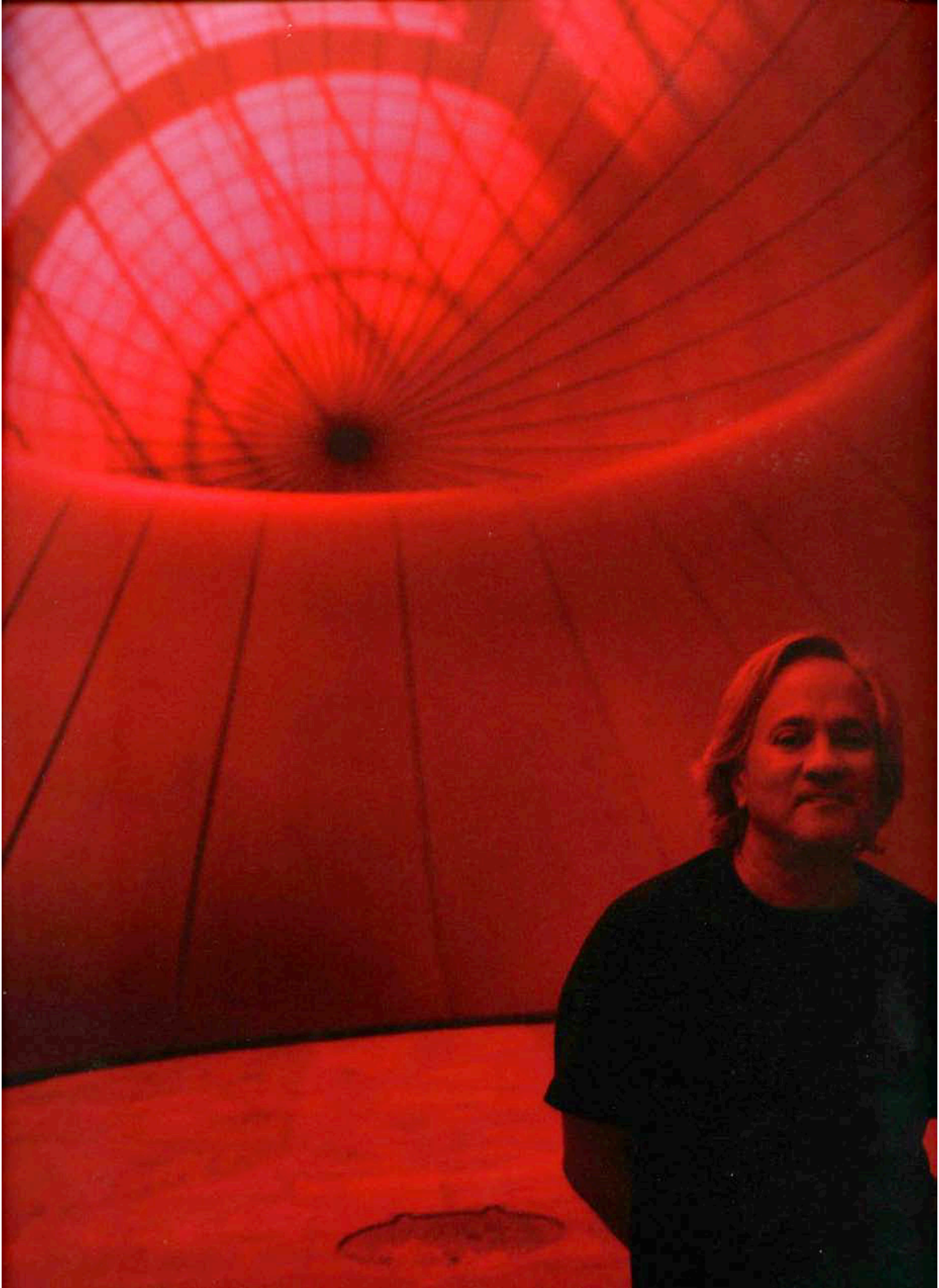
"The whole point of doing it was to enter some new territory as an artist; otherwise, that sense of discovery wouldn't be there, either for me or for anybody else," he explains. "When it first went up, I felt very cheerful because it's the biggest surprise to me." Prior to being inflated, the PVC material lay flat on the ground, pooled out like a "truncated cross," Kapoor says. "I had fantasized that you could blow it up more and more and more so that it would almost burst," he adds, chuckling. "One of the things that interests me is that we can get a sense of what's in these bulbs, but we can't see them properly, so there's always the idea of something being beyond. So I am very taken with this Romantic idea that there is a beyond. I'm obviously thinking of a certain Romantic German art."

The idea of a beyond is crucial to Kapoor's practice and his desire that the visitor will be transported to some fictional place in his or her own mind through experiencing his art. "I'm interested in psychoanalysis," he says. "So you sit with your analyst, and

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before long there's another object in the room — whether it's your lover or your father or your child or whatever — and that gives way to huge power and anxiety. The suggestion is that many of the objects in the world are filled with a similar kind of anxiety; they come to be a third object in this third space. It's the job of the artist to take that and do something with it. Every object is also a non-object, every material has non-material, and at one level it's a fiction. The artist's job is to bring that non-object alive."

For Kapoor, the domain of art offers the freedom for exploring the unknown, unhinged by the constraints of society. "Most of our lives we spend being told what we do, and how we should do it. We learn at school and from our parents, and everything we do is of that order," he says. "The most intimate acts are also learned. In the studio, the artist can dare to do what they don't know how to do. And I think not knowing is the only way to come up with something different. And I feel very strongly that my not knowing can reveal a kind of wonder, which I believe you will share."

Wonderment, fictions, illusions — indeed, since June 23, Kapoor's installation has no longer graced the Grand Palais, having been deflated, reduced to flat materials, and removed. It now exists only as a documented fiction. "Although this thing probably weighs 30 tons, there's this question about whether it's ephemeral or not ephemeral," Kapoor says. "I've had the thought of showing it elsewhere, but we'll see what happens."

He dedicated *Leviathan* to Ai Weiwei, who had been imprisoned by the Chinese authorities. It seems a happy coincidence that Ai Weiwei was released on the day before that Kapoor's exhibition closed. "I've never met Ai Weiwei, but it's a sad indictment of governments that they feel they

can't stand, or can't bear, the virtue of artists," Kapoor said at the opening of his exhibition. "Ai Weiwei may have committed a crime somewhere, but there is no justification for incarcerating him without charge or without trial. Also, I come from a continent next door, and I think it's very, very important that we remain in a certain kind of solidarity with colleagues who are fighting a good, important fight." Kapoor's dismay at Ai Weiwei's arrest led him to cancel plans to show his work at the newly renovated museum in Tiananmen Square as part of the "UK Now" festival in China late next year.

Kapoor's next milestone will be creating the sculpture *Orbit* for the Olympic Park in London ahead of the Olympic Games in 2012. At 120 meters high, it will be Britain's biggest public art commission and is intended to make the Olympic site a popular visitors' attraction. Costing around £19 million, it will be a huge, spiralling, looping tower, also in dark red, that visitors will be able to climb.

"Your piece in London is on an architectural scale," Nouvel said to Kapoor during a conversation at the Grand Palais. "But what's extraordinary is that there isn't a function, because architecture has the constraints of talking about something else. But if there aren't those social constraints, it isn't architecture. You're in the promotion of the desire of people, whereas I have to fight against others' demands."

Kapoor's fight, though, is largely with himself and his capacity to make the experience of his work as mysterious and as memorable as possible. He says, "I think the most important objects in terms of artifacts and objects in the world are objects that are mysterious. And when we see them, we are awed or surprised by them. There are very, very few objects that retain mystery over a long period of time."

