**SCMP Article**

**Too afraid to take a stand, on anything**

I recently wrote that fear of public criticism is making some Hong Kong businesses nervous about getting involved in certain non-commercial activities or partnerships. The proposed renovation of the Avenue of Stars on the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront is a high-profile example. It involves a major developer and mainland tourists - both of which are controversial subjects. But a less touchy case provides another example of this problem.

This is about the hosting of public art. Early last year, British sculptor Antony Gormley was due to put on a large outdoor installation here of fibreglass human figures called Event Horizon. Some of the statues would have been positioned on office blocks in Central. Seen from the street, it would look as if someone was standing right on the edge or corner of the rooftop.

The work had already been shown in London, Sao Paulo and New York. According to the artist, the public often liken the works to "guardians protecting the city from harm".

Unfortunately, the exhibition did not take place in Hong Kong. An investment bank in one of the office blocks asked the landlord to pull out after an employee committed suicide by jumping off the building. We can see why the tenant would perhaps be concerned about what employees or their families might feel.

But from most people's objective point of view, the sad event was unconnected to the art show. The landlord was in a potentially difficult position and ended up taking the easy and safe option - avoid any possibility of controversy - by cancelling the event.

Event Horizon had the full support of the government, and the local arts community was disappointed that the exhibition was cancelled. Now, after work by the British Council and various partners, the show will finally get off the ground. The exhibition will take place at 31 locations around Central, such as the Central Police Station complex. It begins next month and there will be workshops, special tours and talks for students.

As chairman of the art working group for the Central Police Station revitalisation project, I know that organisers are taking precautions.

To some extent, these are necessary. In London and New York, the police received calls from members of the public who mistook Event Horizon figures as suicide attempts. The display also prompted concerns about the statues' possible effect on people suffering depression.

In Hong Kong, organisers have to be especially careful. Will someone complain about the nude statues' genitalia? Elisabeth Frink's work New Man had to appear with a cardboard fig leaf some years ago. And an advertisement featuring Michelangelo's David drew complaints of obscenity. Officials do worry that creative work involving nudity will lead to complaints.

Organisers have considered the possibility that passers-by may feel someone is watching them - and even the statues' possible impact on feng shui.

Suicide is the most sensitive issue. Organisers approached the University of Hong Kong's Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention. Its director, Paul Yip Siu-fai, has said that around 500 people a year kill themselves by jumping from buildings - about 40-50 per cent of all suicides. He said Gormley's work could trigger negative thoughts among some passers-by.

It is not that someone will simply see a figure and decide to jump from a building. The concern is more that the statues could trigger memories or thoughts among people who might be vulnerable or depressed. That could lead to further depression, which could lead to further problems.

But of course all sorts of sights and sounds could trigger negative feelings in someone at any time. It is hardly a reason to cancel an art show.

The delay and nervousness over Event Horizon suggest that Hong Kong people are oversensitive. Personally, I do not think it is local people who are being oversensitive. The real problem, I would say, is that businesses and public bodies are so scared of criticism.