

SEAN KELLY

“Interview: Antony Gormley on his HK sculpture installation, Event Horizon,” *Time Out Kong Kong*, December 2, 2015.



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Eunice Tsang speaks to Sir Antony Gormley about the thinking behind his citywide sculpture installation, Event Horizon, and the public's frightened reaction to his suicidally-perched statues

For the next few months try not to panic when you see a naked man (or a few naked men) standing perilously atop the buildings of Central. On the very first day Event Horizon was launched in Hong Kong, the police received a number of panicky calls from the public who mistook the humanoid sculptures for precariously perched people.

A citywide installation by Sir Antony Gormley, one of the most acclaimed modern British sculptors, Event Horizon is an ambitious project that has travelled the world. For its Hong Kong stop, 31 life-size naked sculptures of Gormley himself are in place around Central and Western districts, from City Hall to Soho. Once you know what's going on, walking around Central becomes an engaging manhunt, a game of spot as many sculptures as possible. Just be careful to keep your eyes on the road and not to walk into a parked car, like we may or may not have done...

The sculptures are casts of your own body. Do you always attempt to include an element of the personal in your works?

I want to work from life, not from an image of life, but from life itself. For practical as well as conceptual reasons I use my own body as my raw material. I order it from within as a tool, and make the body-as-habitat my subject. The works are more than simply personal or intimate – they come from trying to hold on to the 'feeling of being'. This sounds a bit pretentious, but that really is what I tried to hang on to and to concentrate on while being moulded in plaster. This is a profoundly personal, subjective state but one that is also universal. I would almost put this point politically: the work is an objective proof of the position and value of the subject. I believe that subjective experience is the basis of reality. My sculptures are objective correlatives of a moment of personal experience.

The installation has appeared internationally, including in London and New York. Hong Kong is the first Asian city to be included. What message do you want to bring?

I want Event Horizon to be about human existence in the 21st century. Nowadays, over 50 percent of humankind lives in the urban environment and I want to counter the loss of the individual in this mass experience by standing a human space against the sky, against space at large.

In the last 25 years I have witnessed the energetic street life of Chinese cities being swallowed and hidden in high-rise towers. Concrete and glass seem to have replaced a common space in which people lived all aspects of their lives face to face, whether eating, drinking and sleeping or travelling to work on legions of bicycles. In spite of believing that we feel most alive and alert when diving into the sea or standing in the wind at the top of a mountain, what makes us human is our ability to communicate these intense and individual experiences to others; all we have experienced only has value when shared. I want to bear witness to individual existence in the face of abstract corporate, capital values and reinforce the fact that the richness of a society depends on the right of the citizen's unique experience to be seen and heard. The notion of freedom as the exercising of choice in what we buy rather than what we experience is actually a form of slavery.

What does the title Event Horizon refer to?

The title originates from cosmological physics and refers to the boundary of the observable universe. The works remind us of our relationship with deep space and [the statues] gaze out towards the horizon: the meeting between sky and earth invisible to us on the street. The horizon is our perceptual limit, our final skin. There is always the question that beyond those figures that you can actually see, how many more are out of sight, quietly witnessing events beyond our view?

The notion of solitude is a focal point of exploration in Event Horizon. Why did you decide to have the sculptures exist in isolation?

To sense our own existence we have to be alone. This is not about being lonely, but about the cessation of human talk and human touch and their replacement with something bigger and wider. In order to feel completely alive we have to abandon human contact, expose ourselves in time, space and the elements and feel our vulnerability.

Do you think public art is an expanding realm in Greater China? Has this influenced the way in which the installation will be held in Hong Kong in any particular way?

I'm aware that old cities are expanding and new ones being built all the time. In order for them to be more than stables for bodies, and for them to stimulate the mind and enrich the souls of the citizen, there has to be the stimulus of works that engage an imaginative response. I'm very aware that there is a great taste for art in the parks and open spaces of Chinese cities, but it's often placed in the manner of the bit of parsley on the top of your steak: a garnish. What I'm trying to do with Event Horizon is something more disturbing. I want to displace the sense of normality and status quo, make a rupture and shake things up a bit. Event Horizon isn't one work, it's more like an infection of the central area of Hong Kong. The works are like dirt on the carpet, an irritant that makes you aware of the texture of the city and each sculpture is a tiny acupuncture needle, piercing the body of the city. Art is more of a process than a thing. These are not statues that uphold a given order but a way of interrogating the given topography of the city, looking at the city itself as if it were a representation of its values. I hope that through the work we will look at the city, its relationship to its natural surroundings and the language of the buildings themselves: colonial, corporate, institutional, public and their dialogue one with the other. One of the functions of the work is to make us more aware of the texture and meaning of the environment around us.

A lot of people are startled by these sculptures, mistaking them as would-be suicides. How do you see this kind of response from the public?

The whole point of making work in collective space is that it needs no label. You don't need to be precious about it. It is simply an object in space that hopefully confronts you with your own being. You ask it: What the hell is this thing doing here? And it returns the question to you: What are you doing here?

There is no ideology in these works. They are not memorials. In being my body they could be any body. The allied work that the project has undertaken in schools is to help each citizen realise that the works are tools to interrogate their own context and their own inner hopes and fears. These are open works. Here are these dark, silent forms that sit on the streets and against the sky, they are human absences

that act like black holes, compressed voids in the present world that foreground the background and ask where the human project fits in the larger scheme of things.

