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ArtAsiaPacific

"Kwan Sheung Chi, Quite Playful, Quite Boring"





K W A N
SHEUNG CHI

By John Jervis

詢問處
INFORMATION



Q U I T E
P L A Y F U L ,
Q U I T E
B O R I N G

There is an inherent tension in Sol LeWitt's essay "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967) between the assertion that unfettered ideas and intuitive minds are essential to the production of new thought, new perception and new art—and the prescriptive guidance for the aspiring conceptualist that follows. Chatting with Kwan Sheung Chi in his Kowloon studio, it soon becomes clear that, for Hong Kong's foremost practitioner in the genre, the process of art-making is neither as mystical, nor as susceptible to systematization, as LeWitt would have us believe. The 33-year-old Kwan—who shares this spartan three-by-three-meter box with his wife, the artist Wong Wai Yin—is in no way prone to archaic flights of artistic or intellectual machismo. Throughout our conversation, he remains thoughtful, frank and even a little diffident as he reveals the fragility of both the creative processes and the personal assurance that sustain his practice.

Yet, in October last year, Kwan was anointed China's leading "emerging artist," receiving the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award at Shanghai's Rockbund Art Museum, thanks to a decade of quirky, irritating, endearing, frustrating, humorous, pointless, affecting and awkward videos, installations and performances. These strange creations, flickering between meaning and inconsequence, have a resilience, and a sincerity of inquiry, that ensure that they endure when much is forgotten. Kwan's determined self-reflection often circles around the uncertain nature of art-making, but has always drawn on wider contexts to help him confront his underlying goal—puzzling out ways to sustain integrity and humanity in increasingly ominous circumstances.

So this is where it all happens, this is where you practice. I guess you've probably hit the "midcareer" point now—have you established a process for what you do yet?

Actually, I don't regard myself as a very hardworking artist. Most of the time, when I tell people that I'm in my studio, I'm not really doing much. Maybe I'm reading, or going through a website, or trying to get some ideas, or looking for some reference. To be honest, being an artist is a big challenge for me—nobody really knows the truth. Some people still think conceptual art is easy. They look at my installations, and seem to think that I haven't created anything. But for me it's hard. Thinking about the concept, researching it and figuring out exactly how to justify what I am trying to do is a long, difficult process.

Do you sift and reject ideas, or pursue each to a logical conclusion?

I hope to reach a conclusion for everything I attempt. Of course, it's not always possible, but there are often things I uncover along the way, which makes the process of benefit to me. But a lot depends on the project. Basically, I make works in response to something—if I get an invitation to participate in a show, I will look at the context, at the space, at who is organizing it, and who is asking me. Then I start to think about what interests me and start doing some research before I get a clear idea of what to do.

Could you give an example?

Maybe *To Defend the Core Values Is the Core of the Core Values* (2012) is a good illustration. It is a collaborative work with my wife, Wong Wai Yin, commissioned for "Mobile M+: Yau Ma Tei," the first visual arts project organized by Hong Kong's new public art museum. We observed the general mistrust, even hostility, toward M+ in the local art scene, but wanted to experiment with what was possible. I think it's important for us, as artists, to initiate ideas without limitation or convention, and to utilize what institutions can provide—in this case, money and space. We decided to attempt something very political, as the election of Hong Kong's chief executive was approaching—that's why we came up with the idea of questioning what Hong Kong's "core values" might be by offering a gold coin,

(Previous spread)

TO DEFEND THE CORE VALUES IS THE CORE OF THE CORE VALUES (detail), in collaboration with Wong Wai Yin, 2012, participatory and performative project with installation including gold coin, posters and videos, dimensions variable.

(Opposite page, top)

TO DEFEND THE CORE VALUES IS THE CORE OF THE CORE VALUES (detail), in collaboration with Wong Wai Yin, 2012, cover of distributed leaflet.

(Opposite page, bottom)

OPEN THE DOOR FOR THE PEOPLE, 2007, still from single-channel video with color and sound, video: 11 min 59 sec.

All images courtesy the artist.

"To be honest, being an artist is a big challenge for me—nobody really knows the truth. Some people still think conceptual art is easy . . . figuring out exactly how to justify what I am trying to do is a long, difficult process."

MAKE A WISH 為香港
TO DEFEND THE
核價
IS THE CORE OF THE
CORE VALUES.
FOR HONG KONG
值心
核價是核心
值心的

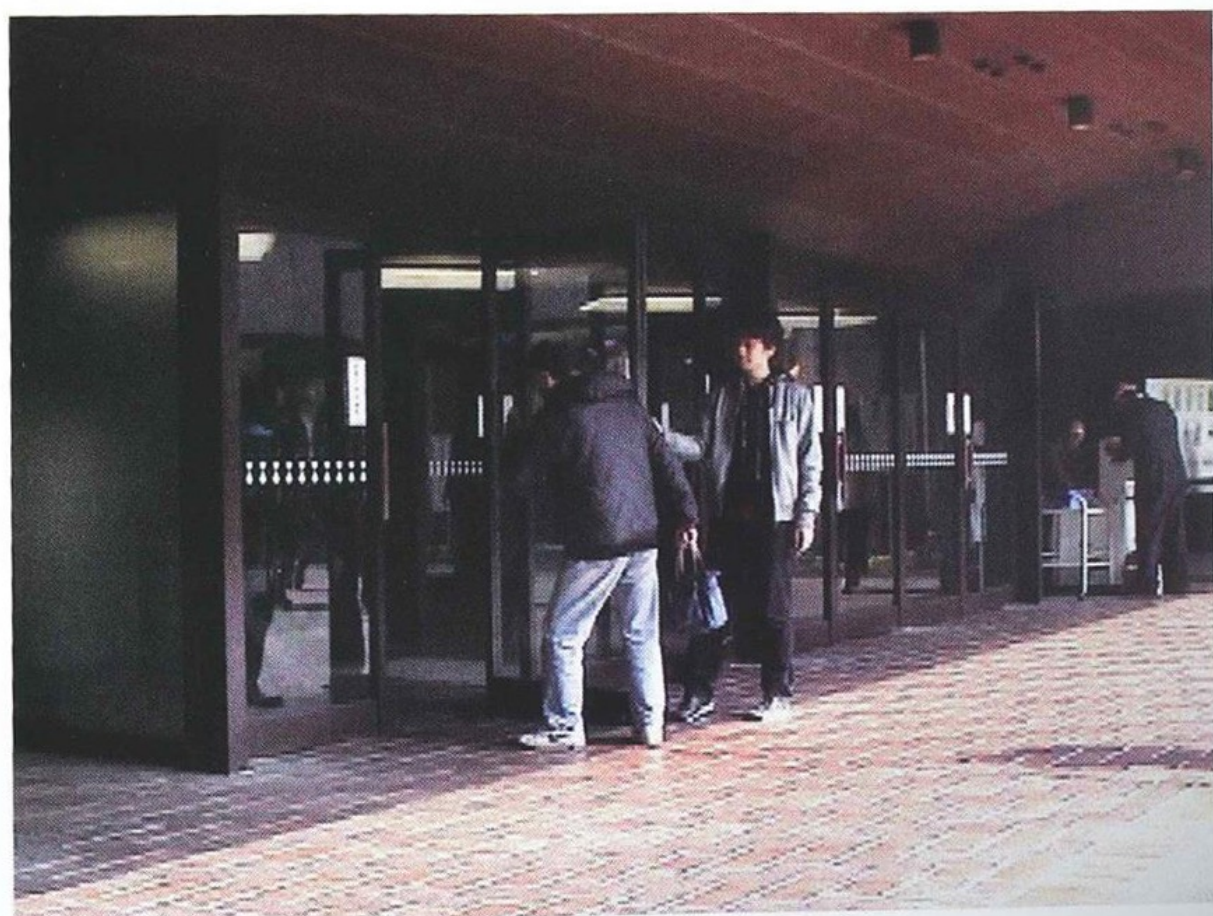
THERE IS A UNIQUE 6.40Z. GOLD COIN IN YOUR HAND. WILL YOU THROW IT IN THE VICTORIA HARBOUR AND MAKE A WISH TO DEFEND THE CORE VALUES OF HONG KONG? OR WILL YOU LET THE COIN STAY IN YOUR POCKET?

獨得 足金
您的選擇
TO GET A GOLD COIN
金幣
24K
11/7

PLEASE VISIT OUR EXHIBITION AND WRITE DOWN WHAT YOUR CORE VALUES OF HONG KONG ARE. YOU WILL GET THE CHANCE TO DECIDE THE FATE OF THE GOLD COIN.

請到訪我們的展覽，寫下您的香港核心价值，由您去決定金幣的去向。

一枚獨一無二，重逾六點二安士的金幣就在您的手中。您會希望將它投入維多利亞港，還是會選擇將它袋平安？



to be kept or cast into Victoria Harbour by the person who best defined them. The real election is restricted to a small and privileged group of unrepresentative people—we thought perhaps M+ could provide an alternative, free platform for different opinions and discussions about values. We wanted to challenge both the museum and ourselves. There were a lot of obstacles—a tight schedule, unconfirmed venues and so on—so we came up with plans for the project but had no idea how things would turn out. In the end, the result was both disappointing and satisfying—there was less public involvement than we had hoped, but we were happy that at the end the discussion did turn to politics.

Public interaction is a significant aspect of your work, as far back as the video *Open the Door FOR THE PEOPLE* (2007), in which you held doors open for random visitors to a Tokyo art museum. Why is this so important?

It's true that I had a tendency to make works that looked outward at the time. The role of the artist in society is something that I keep thinking about—what benefit is there for people either from looking at my art, or from my production of it? And what can I learn from them? Understanding my work is a continual process—I want to be quite clear about my plans each time, but often I discover something that's very different from my original idea, even after installation.

For instance, when I asked if the Hong Kong Museum of Art could arrange to borrow 100 police security barriers, or "iron horses," for their "Looking for Antonio Mak" exhibition in 2008, their guards just gathered them together like that in the gallery. I wasn't quite satisfied with the result, but it turned out that everybody else was very happy. I hadn't really done a big installation before, except for *Don't Let the Tower Fall!* (2007), in which I wrote two proposals for a sculpture of tumbling wooden blocks based on the game Jenga, which was

then executed by Osage Gallery—but that was still about creating something new. For the "iron horses," I did nothing.

So the piece marked something of a change?

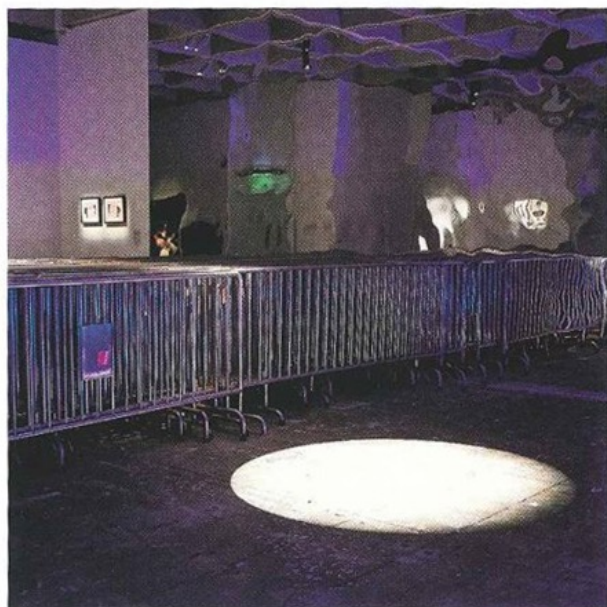
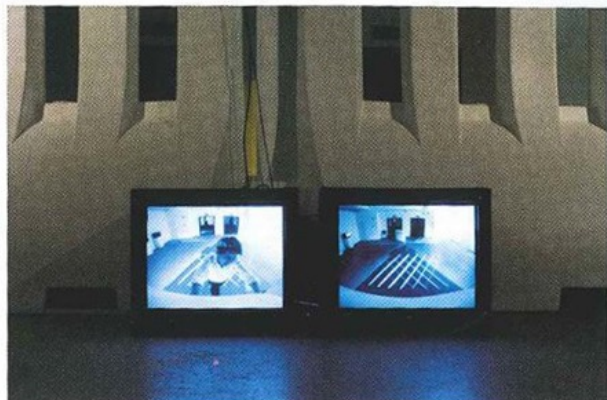
Yes, but at the time I wasn't very confident about how people would react. And there was another really important thing: when my friend, the artist Ching Chin Wai, visited the show, he called and asked if he could climb on a barrier. He handed the phone to the guard, asking me to tell him that Ching could climb on it. It opened up a way of thinking about artworks that I'd never considered before. You have to have very clear instructions about what the particular limitations of a work are—about what can be done with it. Since then, every time I plan a new work, I start to think carefully about exactly how people can interact with it—what the meaning is and what the limits are.

What were the implications for your practice?

It had been a blind spot. There are endless possibilities of engagement and creative reinterpretation from audiences with completed works. It's a good position to consider what regulates our practices and displays of art: there are lots of inherited rules and questionable power relations between artists, spaces and audiences that should be constantly redefined. I think Ching's question actually led to a simple but fundamental principle in my art—to liberate both the mind and the spaces where we encounter art.

More recently, *Water Barrier (Maotai : Water, 1 : 999)* (2013) at the Rockbund was a kind of return of the "iron horses" in a different context. This time, I invited audiences in Shanghai to engage with the work actively by pushing against, and even toppling, two plastic barriers filled with water and a bottle of Maotai, a pricey liquor





(Opposite page)
WATER BARRIER (MAOTAI : WATER, 1 : 999),
 2013, installation view with various media at
 Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2013.

(This page, top)
WATER BARRIER (MAOTAI : WATER, 1 : 999)
 (detail), 2013, two-channel black-and-white
 videos: 24 min 4 sec each, at Rockbund Art Museum,
 Shanghai, 2013.

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**ASK THE HONG KONG MUSEUM OF ART TO
 BORROW "IRON HORSE" BARRIERS: I WANT
 TO COLLECT ALL OF THE "IRON HORSE"
 BARRIERS IN HONG KONG HERE**, 2008, installation
 view of 100 "iron horse" barriers and plexiglass mirrors
 at Hong Kong Museum of Art, dimensions variable.

which tends to be favored at Chinese state events. The work's concept can only be realized through its deconstruction by the collective effort of visitors.

Will the demands of your career require you to undertake more large-scale pieces?

It will depend on opportunities, but I try not to do anything too massive—I try to be eco-friendly! I never want to waste things, especially if I'm not really sure if art has a meaning at all. But I think it's also a characteristic of Hong Kong artists' work.

That they don't work at that scale?

Yes, you can go and see large installations anywhere, actually—just go to Beijing. I don't think it's what Hong Kong artists should do or are good at doing. And it's also impossible because of physical space, and the price of materials and manpower here.

You sound like you're slightly pleased about that!

Yes, I believe that works will be understood and appreciated conceptually, rather than visually, here. I don't think about the visual first, I think about the concept.

What will happen when you get invites to grand shows far away? How will that influence your process?

Well, I haven't had many chances of that sort yet! But of course I would look at what I could say and what interests me in that particular place. I don't want to just do the same thing in different locations. It's not my intention to focus my work on Hong Kong's politics or issues, but somehow I just can't escape them. I feel that this is the most crucial thing I want to think about—when I consider how my work will be received, I feel I need to talk about something that is important to most people. Politics affects everybody.

So the immediate context of Hong Kong is very much part of your conceptual practice?

Of course it is. I think if an artist is trying to do something reflective, it must be very specific to the situation, otherwise it just doesn't say anything. I know it's an obstacle in some ways that my work is difficult to transfer to a different place, but if I'm asking a question, there must be someone that I'm asking that question to, and it has to be about a particular situation.

There is a dignity and also an ambiguity in works such as *A Flags-Raising-Lowering Ceremony at My Home's Clothes Drying Rack* (2007), in which your parents extend or retract the flags of the People's Republic of China, the United Kingdom and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region on their drying rack in a seemingly arbitrary manner. It was one of the works banned by the Shanghai Cultural Bureau before last year's Rockbund show. Given such censorship, are you optimistic about Hong Kong's political future?

Not really, but I regard this as my home and I don't want to leave just because the future will be worse than now. If I leave, it's like I'm giving up my home to the hands of my enemy, and I don't want to do that. There's a sense of belonging here, lots of social movements, protests, demands for universal suffrage and so on. Even if you don't believe that they will change anything, you still want to be part of them. I think of my art as reflective of what's happening in society, but I don't believe I have fulfilled my responsibility just by producing it, or even believe that it can help much. I have to join in, otherwise I'll just be watching events on a computer.

(This page)
**A FLAGS-RAISING-LOWERING CEREMONY
 AT MY HOME'S CLOTHES DRYING RACK,**
 2007, still from single-channel video with
 color and sound, video: 1 min 47 sec.

(Opposite page)
**A FLAGS-RAISING-LOWERING CEREMONY
 AT MY HOME'S CLOTHES DRYING RACK,** 2007,
 installation view of flags from the People's Republic
 of China and the United Kingdom at "Back to the
 Basic" exhibition at C&G Artpartment, Hong Kong.



You were at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) from 1999 to 2003—did you study works by early conceptualists such as Joseph Kosuth or John Baldessari?

Yes, but not in depth. We only had one very general Western art history course, covering modern and contemporary art in one semester. On the whole, you had to read theory on your own. When I read it today, I still think I'm misreading it, but that's not important—for me reading is just a way to get inspired and import ideas as ready-mades into my own thinking.

A small group of artists came out of CUHK at the same time, people such as Lee Kit, Pak Sheung Chuen, Li Tin Lun, Wong Wai Yin and Chow Chun Fai—most of them are your friends. There are various similarities between your practices, for instance your shared interest in the vernacular. What do you ascribe this to?

I guess there are many reasons. Of course the teaching at CUHK was one, and I think that it was the best time to study there, with professors Lui Chun Kwong and Chan Yuk Keung. But we learned more from classmates than from lessons. We had very close relationships both when we studied, and after we left. I shared a studio with Chow Chun Fai and Li Tin Lun until 2008, and later with Wong Wai Yin. We had gatherings all the time, talking about art and other things that we don't talk about so much these days. My early works were focused on the medium, but I changed very quickly to look at something more culturally oriented—more about the role of the artist, and the question of what art can do, and what the value of being an artist is, as well as the value of art in society. I was very conscious that I wouldn't be satisfied by experimenting with form or pure aesthetics, so I think I was quite early to show this concern with systems and social or political issues in art practice—it has now become sort of a fashion, which is not such a bad thing.

Were you all aware at the time that you were doing something that your predecessors weren't doing or hadn't done? That the nature of your art was new for Hong Kong?

To be honest, I think it was just the art scene at that moment. We never imagined that we could be professional artists, so we just did what we thought was meaningful for us, and we didn't have any considerations outside of that. The question is really whether you want to do it or not. If you do, then it's very focused. In some ways, we were quite lucky that the economy was bad at the time, so we could rent a studio cheaply. I actually spent very little so I never worked hard for money but I could still survive.

During your final year at CUHK you organized your own solo show at the Hong Kong Arts Centre. It was presented with ironic distance, making significant use of Warhol in the insistent use of your own profile on prints and products, but also with a certain angst about what it meant to exhibit art. You later cited Roland Barthes on the disgrace that the artist risks when displaying work. Looking back now, what do you think were your motives for the show?

It included angst and irony. I think I'm quite open and honest, and that's not easy. I didn't really like Warhol's works, but saw them as part of a whole phenomenon and made reference to it. I love the Velvet Underground. I was reading Barthes, Italo Calvino and Walter Benjamin at the time, and my works were formed from fragments of these. My personality was still developing and fragmented, I needed time to pick bits up and put together my subjectivity. I'm still doing it. I would like to maintain integrity in my art and personality, but it seems I can't, and perhaps it doesn't really need to be so complete. Yet I cannot avoid the feeling of disgrace because it doesn't come from others, it is deep inside of me.

At the time you lamented a lack of opportunities and audiences, but in retrospect this could be seen as a blessing. Is there such a thing as an ideal art ecology?

I don't believe in ideal art ecologies—artists should be good opportunists. Some great artists can only work in a mess. If I were given a substantial studio, I'd certainly enjoy it, but I don't think my works would become any better. I'd much prefer a healthier social, economic and political environment in Hong Kong—a better cultural ecology should come before a perfect art ecology that only benefits a small group of people.

After graduating, you worked for an art-leasing organization right up to 2009, and at the time seemed to be struggling with the question of whether being an artist was a practical or desirable proposition—for instance you wore a shirt that you'd inscribed with "I Am An Artist" to work in 2004. Are you glad you lived the 9-to-5 life for a while?

Actually I think it was a very wonderful experience! I wanted to live a real life, and work like everyone does. If I'd studied for an MFA or had the chance to be a professional artist immediately, then all my connections would be about art. I didn't want to be a professional—I wanted to be an amateur or underground artist. I hated my job but found it fun at the same time—I was working in the same building as Asia's richest man, Lee Ka-shing. I felt so detached from the environment, it was like doing cosplay [costume play] unwillingly.





I met people that I wouldn't usually encounter—and maybe didn't even want to: merchant bankers, lawyers, accountants. I didn't earn much, and had to wait four years for a raise, but I spent every cent carefully, saving money to buy a secondhand Hasselblad, a tripod and lots of books.

Your work at that time veered from playful one-off pieces such as *A Finished Apple Made by a Finished Pack of Apple Juice* (2008) or *A Dead Mosquito* (2008) to dark videos, for instance the various suicide schemes you proposed in *Plan A to Z to End My Life* (2009). Did you consciously adopt different approaches?

Well, I think most of my works are quite playful (but boring at the same time). I believe all works of art can be understood and interpreted in different layers—for me and a certain audience, they are completely personal, and they do contain messages. I'm not really a relaxed person, always being so intense about things that concern me, but I'm fine coming from this place—I'm not making art that people will like. It helps to know people's thoughts on my works, and I might respond to it in later pieces, but it won't prevent me from doing what I think I should do.

Are you working on any commissions at the moment?

I'm doing a solo project at Para Site, which should start in September. I'd thought of turning Para Site into another art space, so I asked them if I could register them in new name, and they said OK. But after some research, I'm now thinking about removing Para Site's storefront and reinstalling it backward inside the gallery, then creating an organization to occupy the reclaimed space, with no door and open 24/7. Having seen the film *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), I've decided this will be an art space for vampires. Obviously, I will take the role of the only vampire. Now I'm studying the connection between vampires and parasites, as they appear in Marx's class theory.

So it's about creating a parasite inside Para Site?

Yes, kind of, but I've also been looking at the history of Para Site, how it started in 1996 because artists wanted space. Originally it wasn't really an art space—the name "Para Site" was only used for exhibitions, for finding artists. Since then it has changed a lot—it's become an institution. I'm very interested in this because I have my own experience in starting an art space, Woofert Ten in Yau Ma Tei. The two spaces are very different—Para Site is an important art space for Hong Kong and a hub of international exchange, which contrasts with Woofert Ten's focus on the local community.

I'd imagined that Woofert Ten was to some extent a reaction, or a necessary addition, to Para Site's intellectual slant. Is it strange to now find yourself collaborating with this rather different sort of institution?

It's quite a dilemma. I hadn't been to see shows at Para Site for quite a while before I found out I was going to work there for a show. There is a lot of criticism aimed toward Para Site—that they don't care about locals and local issues, that they are too international. That could be seen as problematic, but I think an international angle is necessary—they are clear about what they think is meaningful and shouldn't avoid pursuing it simply so that more people will accept them. We do need various types of art and art spaces—we don't have enough of any sort. However, there are issues surrounding finances—such as, "Why does this space get this amount of money, why don't we have those kinds of resources?"—that add fuel to these debates.

Can you imagine being involved in any more collectives?

It's very difficult. I didn't participate much in Woofert Ten's programs—soon after it started I went to New York for a residency. After I came back, there were communication problems between board members

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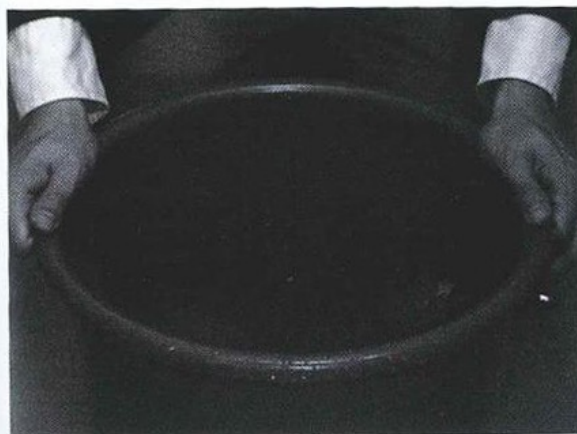
A FINISHED APPLE MADE BY A FINISHED PACK OF APPLE JUICE, 2008, empty apple-juice carton, dimensions variable. Photo by Otto Li Tin Lun.

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PLAN A TO Z TO END MY LIFE: PLAN E: EXPLOSION, 2009, still from single-channel video with sound, video: 13 min. 22 sec.

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PLAN A TO Z TO END MY LIFE: PLAN D: DROWNING, 2009, still from single-channel video with sound, video: 13 min. 22 sec.



and things became difficult. So, after two years, my wife, Ching Chin Wai and I all left the board. The program is still interesting, but I think it has too strong an identity, and ideas are controlled by the organization too much. When I joined, I hoped it would be a platform for artists to experiment, specifically on community-related works, but as it turns out it didn't achieve this.

Do you think it's possible to succeed in this sort of collective, community-focused endeavor?

It's possible, of course, with the right people at both ends. However, most of the time we work in less-than-ideal situations. But what does it mean to succeed? My goal might be to change the world, but someone else might think a 7-Eleven is more useful. I feel that the apocalypse will come before the utopia, if there is any...

One collaboration that has proved fundamental has been that with your wife, Wong Wai Yin. Do you always present your ideas to her?

Yeah, every day I ask her, "Is this art?"

Is she unfailingly honest?

I doubt it, although once she said, "This is just rubbish." But if she asks me the same question and I answer straight away, "Yup, it's art," she'll say, "You shouldn't answer me so quickly, since you spend all your time doubting what is and isn't art." When we collaborate, the only way is to work together until we agree—it can be difficult. She is willing to sacrifice her thoughts for a decision, but I'm not willing to sacrifice her thoughts. She is more intuitive; I'm a very inefficient working person.

Your comments on being an artist seem to come from a humanistic position—do you have an aspiration for what an artist could be?

Hmm... yes, but I've not really convinced myself. Sometimes I think that the artist can try to provoke new ideas for the audience, or those that participate in cultural activities, and to change some general opinions in society. It may not change much very quickly, but, unlike in other fields, it doesn't have use value at the start, so can be expressed freely and without many restrictions. It's a field in which to experiment and demonstrate different perspectives, or different ways of thinking or living. But my opinion is still changing—when I place this in the context of what is actually happening now, I feel it's not practical to think like this. There are so many problems in society. Maybe even mentioning that a work can have a direct influence on society is too optimistic—I'm still struggling with what the real value is.

Reactions to your work—including the Hugo Boss award—suggest that people do think that your art has a certain power, even if both you and they aren't quite sure why. In a way, that's a rather strange responsibility, to be seen as some sort of shaman, but not quite know what it is that you're trying to do.

I think that one reason why I keep making works is that if I'm not doing this then I would have nothing to do. The other reason is to try to find a better way to answer the question, so every time I try to look for that better way.

So, do you think you'll still be searching in 20 years' time for what it all means?

Until the end, maybe! I think it's better that way—if I'm not searching then I'm dead already, or at least my career is. I don't want that. ☹