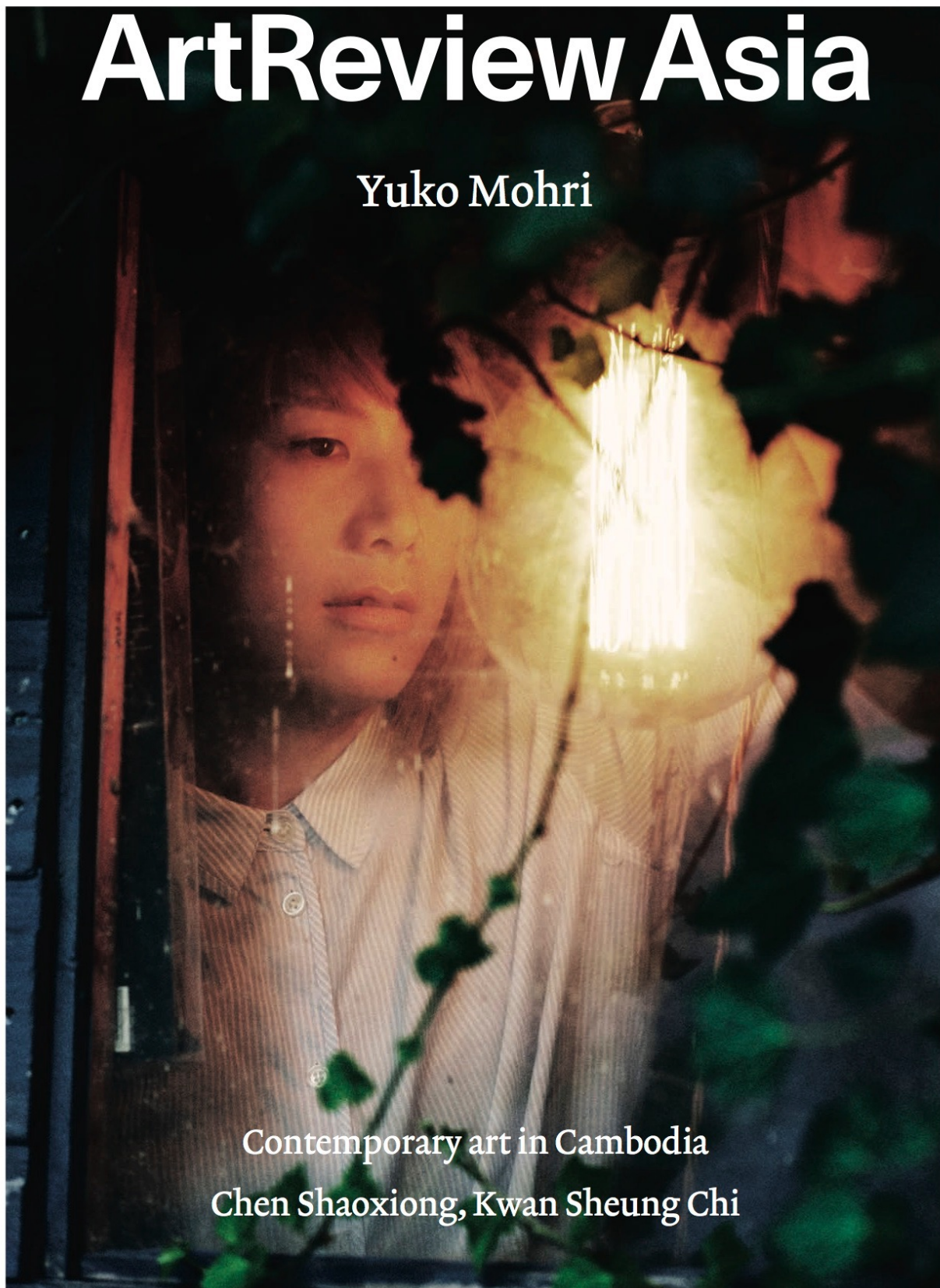


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Yuko Mohri



Contemporary art in Cambodia
Chen Shaoxiong, Kwan Sheung Chi

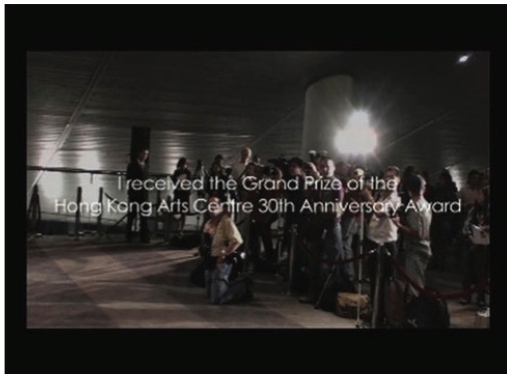
Faint Praise

Don't let Hong Kong artist Kwan Sheung Chi's deadpan take on glitzy self-celebration in the commercial artworld distract you from a body of sharp conceptual work – or from his own very real success

by Ming Lin



Kwan Sheung Chi and Wong Wai Yin,
Man's Future Fund - Gold Nipple, 2014, installation;
pure gold, LED torch, lambda print, wood shelf



'Kwan Sheung Chi was born in 1980, Hong Kong. He obtained a third honor B.A. degree in Fine Art from The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2003. His artworks haven't been widely exhibited around the world, and he has never participated in any major exhibitions held internationally.' So reads the very candid bio on the back cover of *A Brief Chronicle of Kwan Sheung Chi's Artistic Career*, a 2010 monograph tracing the artist's trajectory from the year 2000 to 2009. Though it was published at a time when the work might not yet have been considered fully-fledged enough to warrant retrospect, fast-forward the six years since and you'll find a résumé that reads far more illustriously. Despite numerous accolades and participation in both national and international exhibitions since then, however, the Hong Kong artist remains decidedly unfazed by his achievements to date, consistently creating works that maintain a degree of wit and institutional cynicism.

In 2013, for example, upon receiving the inaugural Hugo Boss Asia Art Award, Kwan told the press, frankly, 'I'm still the same artist, I do not gain more talent by winning this award.' He spent his winnings on a camera, a tie for his father and, at her request, a pair of fake pearl earrings for his wife (Wong Wai Yin, also an artist). Prior to that he had taken the stage once before, at the 2008 Hong Kong International Arts and Antiques Fair, for the Grand Prize of the Hong Kong Arts Centre 30th Year Award, accepting the prize on behalf of a close friend and fellow artist, the painter Chow Chun Fai. Kwan filmed himself walking up to the podium and accepting the award, and this became a sub-two-minute videowork, which he titled *For All the Artists who Want a Prize*, demonstrating flippant regard for institutional praise and its attending

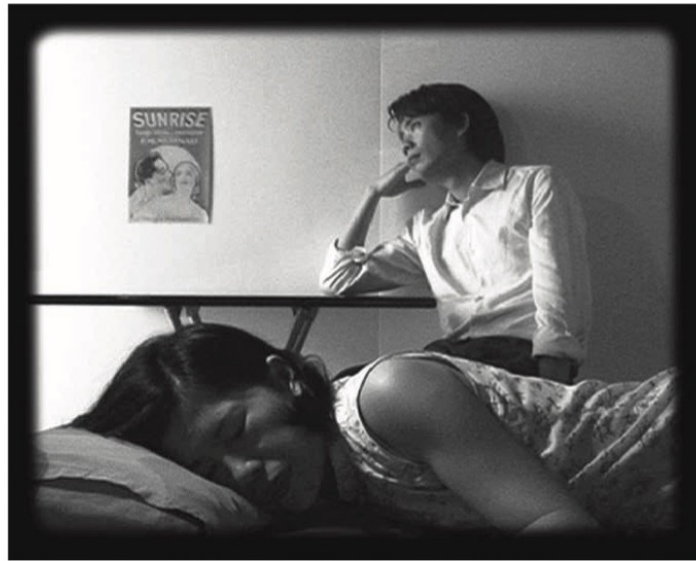
Kwan Sheung Chi, *For All the Artists who Want a Prize*, 2008, single-channel video, 1 min 43 sec

fanfare. Such affirmations do not particularly interest Kwan, who regards the bureaucratic structures of the artworld with a degree of remove and scepticism. His decision not to dwell on these things, and tendency to flaunt them as performative gestures, forms its own strain of criticality. There shouldn't, he tells me, "be competition between artists", while in the same breath admitting, "I don't mind if there are a considerable amount of prizes, I wish I could win every year to make living easier."

It can be difficult not to become beholden to the financially driven interests of the artworld in Hong Kong, often considered Asia's cultural capital, where opportunities to make work come with the expectation of high returns on behalf of investors. In 2010, Kwan and his wife, a frequent collaborator, were sponsored by K11 Art Mall to debut a new work at ARTHK 10 (Art Basel Hong Kong's predecessor) and asked to preview this work, *Everything Goes Wrong for the Poor Couple*, on the premises of the mall. Rather than submitting themselves to the distinct branding of the commercial enterprise and its luxury, stifflingly perfumed environs in the glitzy, tourist-ridden shopping district of Tsim Sha Tsui, Kwan and Wong opted instead for inaction. With the artists and sponsors having announced the title and duration of their piece, *15 Minutes Performance*, visitors and members of the press who showed up, the latter armed with heavy documentation equipment, were bemused as they waited patiently for something to happen, only to find the two artists themselves waiting for an event – Kwan was seen frequently glancing at his watch – that seemingly never occurred. Afterwards, the two were found at a neighbouring bookshop celebrating the launch of their new book with no acknowledgement of the



Kwan Sheung Chi and Wong Wai Yin,
Everything Goes Wrong for the Poor Couple, 2010,
video installation with live performance



anticlimactic Beckettian event prior. Making spectacle out of the spectacle of the artworld itself, the performance shed light on the structures, formalities and expectations constituting an ‘art event’.

While shopping malls aren’t typically considered ideal exhibition venues, in Hong Kong, where nonprofits and artist-run spaces are few and far between, and larger art museums and institutions are relatively conservative in their curatorial efforts, they have emerged as a third space, emblematic of the commercial and private interests underpinning the development of the arts and culture sector. These spaces also hold the potential to open up more democratic and accessible modes of viewing, and as Kwan himself acknowledges, proprietors of these establishments may have more resources and further-reaching influence than a lot museums. Many of these mall magnates, he points out, are quite ambitious in setting up arts foundations and new exhibition sites even outside of the shopping arena. The commercial context, however, effectively serves as potent backdrop for the cheeky evasions and inversions of Kwan’s work.

In a city increasingly overrun with neoliberal ideals and the attitudes bred by them, what are the real ‘core values’ that define Hong Kong? Using the official rhetoric of the government, Kwan took up this question in a project commissioned by M+, Hong Kong’s Museum for Visual Culture, for its offsite *Mobile* exhibition in 2012 (the museum’s permanent premises is set to open in 2019). His work, made in collaboration with Wong, was titled *To Defend the Core Values is the Core of the Core Values*, and in it, viewers were invited to record their

He spent his winnings on a camera, a tie for his father and, at her request, a pair of fake pearl earrings for his wife

own definition of what they considered the territory’s core values, from which a ‘winning’ answer was drawn. This participant was then lavished with a 181g gold coin bearing the Bauhinia blossom, the national flower of Hong Kong, which is itself a contentious symbol that highlights the fraught relationship between Hong Kong and the mainland (as witnessed by the hoards of Chinese tourists who flock to the gilded flower statue gifted to Hong Kong by the mainland, which sits behind the Hong Kong convention centre on Golden Bauhinia Square, a site neglected by Hong Kongers themselves), which the winner was then given the option of keeping or throwing into the harbour. The winner was Leung Kwok Hung, a local leftwing politician who goes by the name of ‘Long-Hair’ (known for his radicalism, he was recently arrested for allegedly making undeclared payments to a local media tycoon, an investigation

he says is politically motivated). In 2012 Long-Hair opted to keep the coin, claiming that his party, the League of Social Democrats, could certainly use the funds. Feeding back into the political system, this work might be seen as a source of anxiety or achievement. The curators of the exhibition likely breathed a sigh of relief that the coin – which cost a considerable amount to produce – was at least not swallowed by the watery depths. As to the core values, it would appear that these remain elusive or just out of reach.

Funnelling the resources in and out of institutional frameworks, taking events from his own life as source material: these tactics on Kwan’s part are both pragmatic and conceptual. In 2014 Kwan and Wong

Kwan Sheung Chi and Wong Wai Yin, *Everything Goes Wrong for the Poor Couple* (still), 2010, video installation with live performance



established *Man's Future Fund* in an effort to generate financial security for their young son, Man. Using red-packet money – cash gifts made to children from loved ones – to fund an initial work (*Gold Nipple*, 2014, a shelf on which sat various objects, including a baby bottle teat cast in gold), the proceeds from the sale of which will then be used in the production of the next work in the series (*Gold Nipple* was on show at Art Fair Tokyo in 2015), the couple plans to create a new work each year until their son reaches the age of eighteen, at which point all profits will be passed to him. While often creating works that manifest the utilisation of art's formal properties towards material or ideological ends, art, Kwan asserts, doesn't have to comment on society, nor can it be a solution for actual problems. In his view, rather, making political work is an evasive manoeuvre that enables him to avoid making concessions to the realm of pure spectacle. Projects such as *Man's Future Fund* and *To Defend the Core Values...* may be viewed as subverting art's co-option by capital, overturning the exploitative characteristics of the market and overtly channelling resources back to where they are needed.

His interest in refuting established structures drives his concerted attempts to mimic and construct his own. These efforts are aided by the close-knit group of artists and friends that Kwan has gathered around him, most of whom he met while still a student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In 2009 Kwan and Wong were also part of the group that founded Wooferten (now itinerant), at Shanghai Street Art Space in the Yau Ma Tei district, which was part of an initiative of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council to cultivate a vernacular art scene. At C&G

Artpartment, founded by Clara Cheung and Gum Cheng, the bi-monthly *Under the Bed* series, for example, invites artists and peers to share unseen, or previously 'swept-under-the-bed', work. In addition C&G Artpartment hosts a painting school and exhibition space. Cheung and Cheng, along with Wong and Kwan, are some of the artists in Hong Kong who have been working towards a more multi-faceted local arts ecology.

Having come so far since penning that original downbeat biography for himself, Kwan now has a lot to live up to – or perhaps having already mentally reached this career apex is what allows him the space for unhindered contemplation. To his credit he has no pretensions about what the life of a successful artist should look like. For the better half of last year he spent several hours a day at his local McDonald's, a wife nomad like so many others seeking refuge for the price of a cup of coffee under the golden arches. Each day he sat and watched, content, in his own words, to observe just "how people deal with their difficult lives and boring work". In a city as dense as Hong Kong, as in most global cities, public space is an increasingly rare thing to come by. Kwan's work reactively highlights areas of lack, operating inversely and challenging viewers' notions of what to expect on encountering an art object. He works persistently not to build visions for a utopic future but rather to bring forth and highlight the structures that are already there. ara

above Kwan Sheung Chi and Wong Wai Yin, *To Defend the Core Values is the Core of the Core Values*, 2012, installation with happenings and video
all images Courtesy the artists

Work by Kwan Sheung Chi can be seen in the exhibition Public Spirits, on view at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, from 22 September through 8 January