

October 2019

CURA Magazine (Issue no. 32)

"Inside The Cover: Wong Ping, in conversation with Yung Ma"

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INSIDE 53 THE COVER

WONG

PING

IN CONVERSATION

WITH YUNG MA

YM You were not trained as an artist. Instead, you studied graphics and design-related communication in Australia. Why did you want to do that? Had you always been interested in graphics/animation? And what did you do after you returned to Hong Kong?

WP I got shipped off to Australia for high school by my parents because of my poor grades, and later I didn't know what major to choose at university. Multimedia design was a new subject that did not require an exam back then, so I applied for it. Even the professors were not clear about the curriculum, they pretty much taught everything. I didn't feel excited about anything in particular at that time, not to mention art or design. I liked reading comics though. It wasn't until the second half of my senior year that something finally caught my attention. In one of the classes, the professor kept showing us independent MVs and short films. And I remember there was a moment when my head seemingly exploded, I thought, "Wow, how is this possible?! It's insane! What on earth is this!" And yet I forgot all about that soon after I left the room. When I returned to Hong Kong, I found that my education abroad could not keep up with the Hong Kong market in terms of technology. I was less competent than the locally educated students, and it was impossible to find a job. I went to the library and borrowed some software books about motion graphics design. After studying for about a month, I somehow managed to put together some pretty awful work samples and used them at my interview with a TV station. It worked. I guess I was hired because they needed cheap labor, so I started doing post-production for their drama programs. Basically the job was to apply fairly low level special effects, like removing any visible wires, smoothing out the skins of the stars, and creating explosions, etc. It really made me wonder about my purpose in life. Two years later, I was fired.

YM You then became involved with the animation/short film circuit. You still are actually. But how was that experience? And do you think it had an impact on your practice and involvement with the contemporary art world?

WP At that point, I did not put much effort into animation or video making,

nor was I familiar with the so-called circuit. I worked at the TV station to earn a living. I didn't know other animators or filmmakers. It was my after work hobby. When I finished, I just uploaded everything on the Internet. What I find interesting is that there is not much connection among the circles of creation. For example, people in the animation circuit are not familiar with those involved in the art world, and vice versa. Even something such as the small circle of the illustration field pays very little attention to what is going on in other spheres. This has always put me in an awkward position. I'm not a skillful animator nor do I know much about art, but I guess that's also why I don't have much baggage. I actually enjoy this freedom, and it's nice. I have learnt a lot between then and now, both technically or otherwise—I have been learning and growing (btw, being regressive also counts as growing to me). Many people have asked me how I expect the audience to react (to the videos) or what I hope they will get from my work. Perhaps as they are just my 'bedroom work,' a personal hobby not so different from playing basketball after work, so the concept of an audience doesn't quite exist for me. When I was job hunting after I came back to Hong Kong, I realized that everybody would make some kind of 'mainstream' show reel, turn it into a disc and send it to all the big companies. But the game had changed. There are so many online platforms nowadays, and they all strive for a high volume of traffic. So, instead of working for a big company, everyone should just try to make their own thing, and let those companies come to you. The way you became an artist was sort of accidental I think. How did you feel about that?

YM

WP

To me, artist is just a title. Before my works were shown in "an art space," I had been consistent in creating "art-works" and putting them online in my free time, but I wasn't considered as an artist during those days since an artist should participate in exhibitions. I don't understand why you used the word 'accident'... so how can one become an artist in a professional way? Can a student who has just graduated with an art degree call himself or herself an artist? I have also heard some enthusiastic slogans such as "everyone is born an artist" or "bring art to the community," but when the discussion





goes further, everything returns to “I have been professionally trained” or “the general public cannot understand because they lack enough art-viewing experience.” I’m not resisting this title or term. It’s just that I feel awkward to be called an artist when I haven’t even figured out what it means, and it makes me quiver most of the time.

YM Okay... but now that you have had quite a few institutional exhibitions internationally, has that changed your perception of being an artist?

WP It’s just made me more confused than before, and I don’t want to spend time discussing whether I am an artist or not. At the beginning of doing these exhibitions, I felt uneasy, maybe because I didn’t have any formal training. I was struggling with my own shallow imagination of an artist—always saying something deep and meaningful such as changing the universe, an epoch-making revolution, etc. I found myself trying too hard, and realized that I shouldn’t have put the weight of the world on my shoulders. So, I decided to return to what I like, what made me happy, and what I wanted to talk about. After a while, however, I began to think about the purpose of making these works.

I think there should be something more than just expressing myself and enjoying my time, but I still don’t have the answer for what that is. If the purpose is to express and make myself feel happy, then I am most thrilled when I am dreaming up a story. For me, having a fully developed idea or work in my head is the most fulfilling thing ever. But, what is the purpose of realizing it and sharing it with others then? I haven’t figured that out yet. I definitely enjoy this part as well, but it feels like I owe myself and the others a proper reason. This seems especially true when it comes to preparing for an exhibition. Since so much time, effort and manpower are put together just for me, I often feel sorry for causing so much trouble. Everyone has their own thoughts and opinions, and I’m just one voice among billions of people. Those who help me to do the set-up, move things around, all have their unique ideas. What’s the value of delivering my ideas to others? Why are my ideas special?

If we look at what has been happening in the streets of Hong Kong—when you

see that heartless government headquarters are always surrounded, when you are chased and beaten by loads of unidentifiable police officers, and when you are coughing violently because of tear gas smoke, it’s hard not to have doubts about the value of the things you do every day. This sense of defencelessness is not only affecting me or the artists, but people from all walks of life.

YM I remember you mentioned that it’s been quite a steep learning curve. Can you talk more about that?

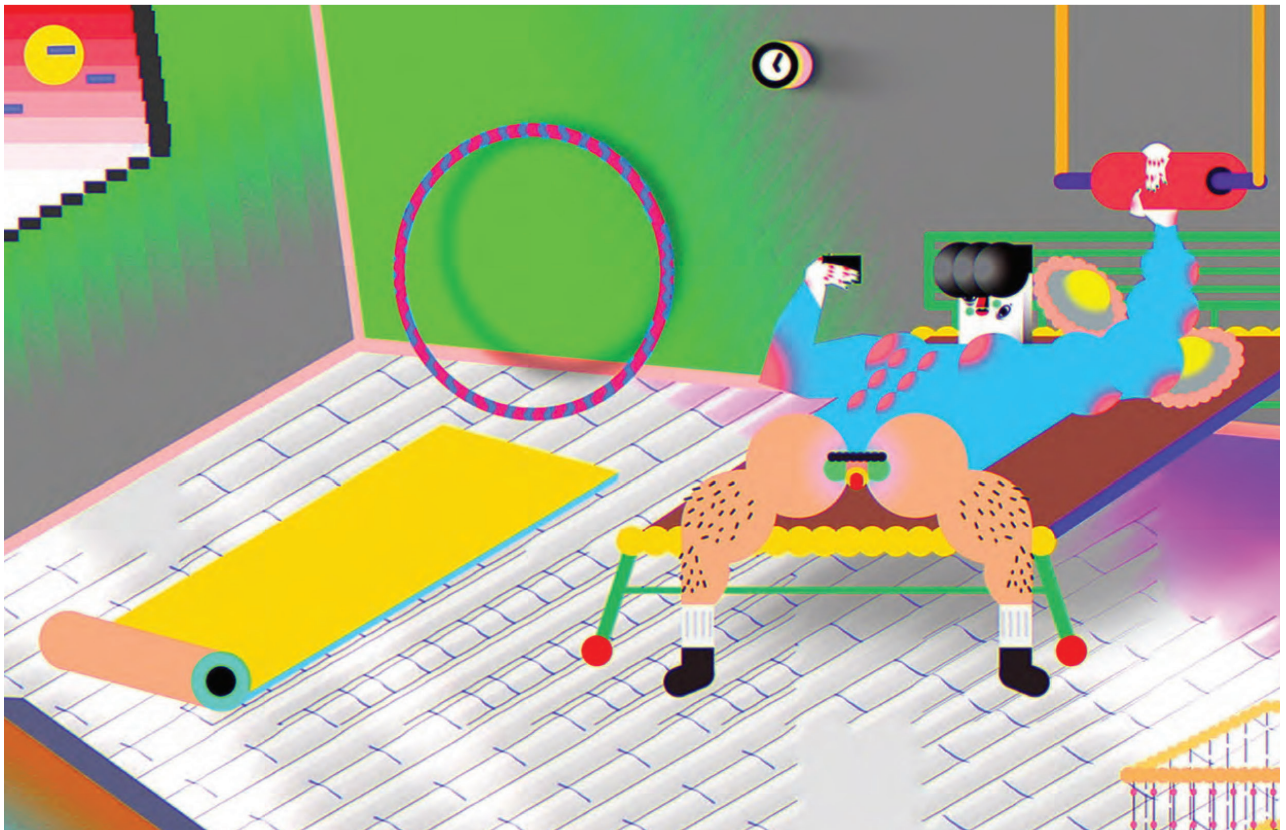
WP The first time I experienced anxiety was when I was working with you. It was also the first time I showed my ‘bedroom work’ in a physical space. Back then, I had gone to less than ten exhibitions in my entire life and I had never heard of the word ‘curator’ before. All I needed to finish my works were my mouse, my keyboard and pressing ‘upload.’ The use of space or how to present a work in space was never something I had to consider. And you didn’t lower your standards for me. There was a moment that I really wanted to cry. It felt like you were inviting me to play real football when I had only played the video-game version in my room. I told you “No. I can’t.” And you just said, “It will be fine.”

What I remember distinctly is that you asked me how I would like to present the work. And when I couldn’t give you an answer, you suggested putting the TV on a white plinth, and you explained to me that it is the most neutral object in the art field. What I thought at that moment was the plinth wasn’t neutral at all! It was white, boring and obtrusive. It took me a while to grasp all these art terms. Although I may not agree with them, when I look back, it was a very good introduction!

Aside from letting go of the meaningless assumption that I have mentioned, what I have learned in recent years is mostly about how to communicate with people since my creative process has always been the bedroom and the Internet. I am a Scorpio, slow to open up and hard to adapt (though I know little about zodiac signs).

The crazy part of my work is actually an epitome of the real me before being sent to Australia, a typical class clown. After returning to Hong Kong, I became afraid of expressing myself. It had never occurred to me that, through my work, I would meet myself in the past, a self only seen by people that





I trust and I am most intimate with. Not surprisingly, other people who saw my work would assume that I am a pervert, so when they meet me in person for the first time, they often seem disappointed, which makes me feel sad. Here is another example: I was so overwhelmed during one of the opening dinners that I rushed back to my hotel, as if someone else had taken control of my body. I remember I was smiling the moment I left the restaurant. From then on, I learned to drink a bit first so that I can be slightly drunk and oblivious to what I say.

YM I thought I was being nice and supportive! Anyway, it hasn't even been five years since your first exhibition. Do you think everything has happened too fast? Are you worried about that?

WP There was this moment that I wished the exhibition at Guggenheim would come later. It had nothing to do with the institution, but more because I felt that I hadn't fully lost my so-called burdens yet. Besides, considering my lack of experience in handling space and everything, it was very hard for me. I have since enjoyed the process—es more though.

Honestly, my background is not in art. I knew little about these institutions and spaces before I collaborated with them. No offense, it was entirely because of my ignorance and lack of experience. It turns out that every one of them has been freshly amazing to me, though I have no idea about my place or role. When you use 'fast' to describe having multiple opportunities to exhibit internationally, I feel quite the opposite as showing my work in a physical space means it only happens in one city while putting work online is already sharing it with the world. So, I don't know how to define fast or slow, neither of them equals good. As the Chinese saying goes—stay alert even when you feel comfortable, and even more so when you feel unstable.

Lately, I do feel that I need more time to myself in spite of my unflappable personality (maybe you can also say that I don't have any expectations). Unlike some artists who can determine their research direction and use all the tools in their arsenal to practice, develop and explore, I don't even know what I'm discussing here as they are just the day-to-day, pretty much from my own 'diary.' What I do know is that

I need to stay alive and poke around from time to time, until something ridiculous, paradoxical and absurd comes up as there's not much I can do. Waking up every day without a direction to do research makes me feel anxious and uncertain. Fortunately, I found consolation in last year's exhibition *Wong Ping's Fables*. And FYI, I have actually always been interested in opening a vintage shop instead.

YM I think I once said something about many of your works being very rooted in Hong Kong. At that time, I was using the example of how you chose to construct the interiors of *Slow Sex*. The entire work essentially takes place inside a small bedroom, where a lot of the details, down to the bedding, seem extremely 'Hong Kong' to me. You, at the time, kind of brushed me off... do you want to try and answer this question again?

WP It was a while ago and I still have little to say. I really don't think that much when I am creating. Writing occupies most of my time. The story is the essence or at least it's the part that I'm more committed to. When I write, I don't think about the visuals, and when I finish writing and go back to the drawing and animation part (although I do it all by myself, it feels like handing over to the other me), I don't draw with the story in mind. They are two completely separate things for me. And processing the images is like some kind of divination. Compared to writing, it was relaxing, but also tedious and lonely. When you asked me this same question back then, I did try to think about which aspects gave you that kind of feeling.

I am always worried about being a cliché. So, I try my best not to have the so-called very 'Hong Kong' element intentionally. It has also never been an angle for me. All I can say is that I was born and raised in 'Hong Kong', in this case, it is not surprising that my work feels very 'Hong Kong', either visually or in my stories. It would just be weird if my work gives a strong Northern India impression.

YM Of course, but, I guess what I am trying to say is that there's this distinct visual quality of 'Hongkongness.' And on a narrative level, it's almost impossible to ignore Hong Kong in them. But most people, art professionals included, discuss your work in the context of desire and fantasy, and often in relation to our/human sexual expressions. It's, of course, natural to view them in

those terms. What do you think about that?

WP

Sometimes I really enjoy doing interviews because I don't think about the choices I made when creating the work, I only take the time to do it and focus on the story I want to share. It's mostly or entirely intuitive and pure. It is only during the interview that I am willing to look back and go through the reasons behind my choices. It doesn't mean that the reasons for making these works are not important, but this is very difficult for me as I prefer intuitive thinking. When I feel that there is a sense of, or an indication of, sexual expression, I stop there and maintain that ambiguous feeling, and just move on to the next part. I wouldn't walk towards it and take off its corset. It was never my responsibility to reveal or interpret my work, or should I say it takes the fun out of it. And I don't have much patience, so I only don't do short films.

I often say that my work is a diary. Basically, what you see is this unlocked diary lying around on the street. Every time I start or finish a work, I don't think it has a specific theme. It's just a note that records myriads of thoughts, stories, or experiences over a period of time. It embraces desire, fantasy, sex, etc., subjects that fall under the category of humanity. A diary records something about humanity, after all.

YM

Another idea that's been used frequently to describe your practice is your depiction of our technological anxiety. Do you think that's something personal? I remember you said something about not being very good with computers... that's why you chose to use this 8-bit like graphics for your video. Is that really the case?

WP

This seems to involve two aspects, one related to 'story' and the other 'image.' 'Not being very good at computer' means my techniques are run-of-the-mill compared to most of the animators. It looks so ordinary as if it was done by a beginner. When others describe my style, they often mention 8-bit, but in fact, 8-bit is something different. I understand that, for the non-professionals, 8-bit equals a relatively simple, almost rudimentary, style, and in this case, it is very appropriate. My style originates from the motion graphics design that I learned when I was working. To be honest, I

haven't made much progress since. It was very trendy to learn 3D software during my study, but I had no idea what I was doing and my mind was on the verge of exploding. I gave up completely one year later. When I started experimenting with animation again, I chose to maximize these few techniques that I had instead of learning something new. Let me explain. When a Michelin chef cooks a lobster, he makes it super delicious based on dozens of cooking methods and hundreds of flavorings that he has in mind. And in my case, as I have given up the research, I only focus on getting a fresh lobster and steaming it with impeccable timing. The savory taste of the lobster itself is all I need to cheer me up.

Moving on to the story aspect, I do mention quite a lot about human interaction with modern science and technology. Again, this diary records what's happening around me from a personal perspective. It's just that we live in this era of globalization, and the Internet makes our lives very much alike, in which case it becomes easier for one to resonate with others. I don't deliberately talk about current technology though. Like I brought up Tinder when I first joined it, or how much I hated Cros.

Sometimes when sitting on the toilet, it occurs to me that what I do is inseparable from my computer—my work stays within the frame of the monitor; I use my MacBook to write stories, to do graphics, to make animations and dubbing; even when I'm taking a rest, I use the same MacBook to watch Netflix. My work cannot be seen without power or electricity. This kind of worry urges me to make something physical, tactile and palpable.

YM

So, do you see yourself as part of this Internet generation of artists? Or even post-internet?

WP

You should be the one to tell me as I don't know how artists are classified. My Internet experience starts from the 56 kbit in middle school. So, I guess I do belong to the Internet generation. As I mentioned in *Doggie's Love*, it used to take quite a long time to download porn. Nowadays, I have even spotted people watching HD porn films on the bus. It seems that the more erotic stimuli we have, the less sensitive we become, and now people are not easily aroused.

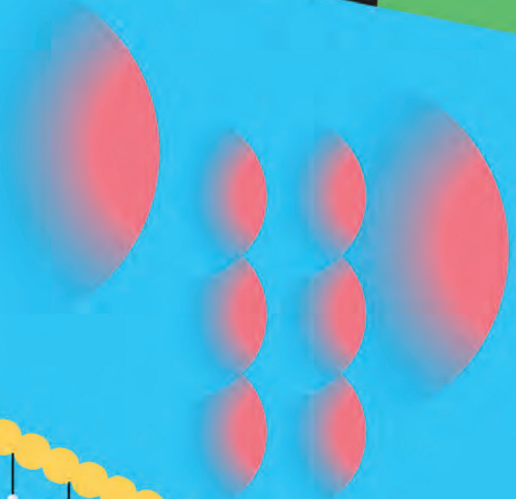
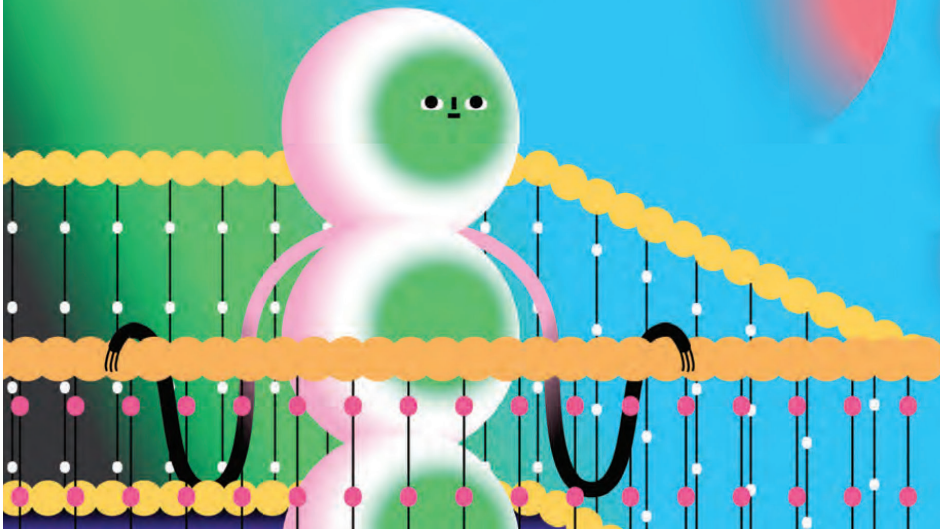
With the advent of the Internet age,

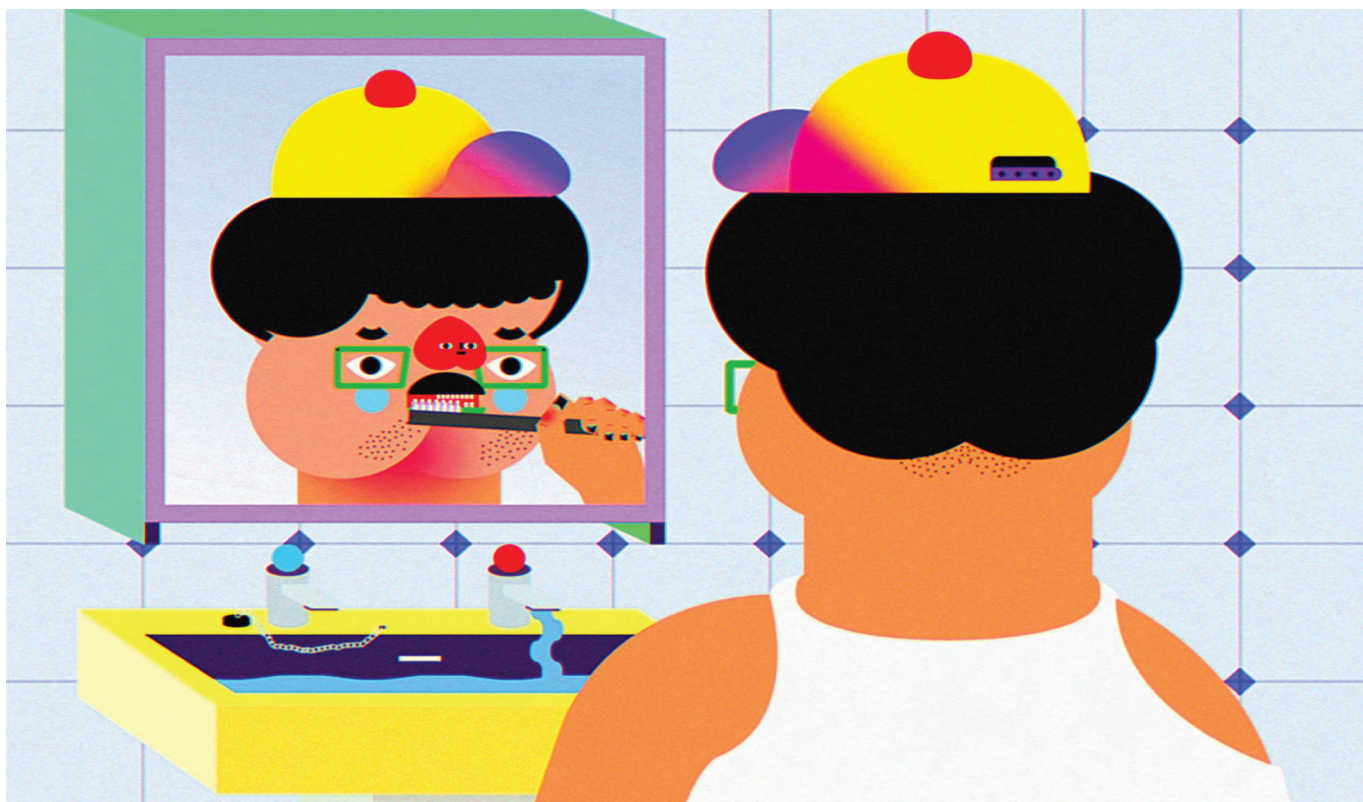
One Hand Clapping, Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Photo: David Heald Image Courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (pp. 64-65)

Who's the Daddy, 2017 (poster) Courtesy: Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist

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everything seems more personalized. Even though I can find all kinds of information online, my searches always start from me. It may seem that I have read many different contents each day, but they all reside in the so-called stratosphere. Too much personalization makes your focus narrower. Another case would be the Omakase dining experience—since the choice is not made by you, you can have a variety of tastes, otherwise you would only stick to what you like. Thinking about the fact that the next generation is born with the Internet, I feel sad for them.

YM To be honest, I don't quite know how to define post-internet myself. I want to go back to the idea of your work having this 'Hongkongness.' I have talked about how your animations, in a sort of morbid way, reflect heavily on Hong Kong's socio-political situations. Like police brutality in *Jungle of Desire* or Beijing's control over the city in *Who's the Daddy?* (at least that's how I interpret them). Do you agree with that? I'm asking that because I think this is a really important aspect of your practice that's not mentioned often otherwise.

WP In fact, I didn't know how to do graphics when I started to work at the TV station. One day I finished my work early, and I was really bored. So I tried to draw a picture with the computer. It was like the shape in the game of Tangram, which is very close to my current style. That was the first digital illustration I made. Over the last few years, lots of things have happened in Hong Kong. Many young people have started to pay attention to, or participate in social movements. Everyone has used different methods to fight—marching on the streets, protesting online, making editorial cartoons or illustrations. When this first started, I would draw a picture every day to record or respond to the different incidents, much like meditation. It was through these social issues that I began to use my creativity to vent my feelings.

When I became bored with just drawing, I moved on to animation as I felt it allowed more space for different subject matters and me to express more. However, it takes such a long time to do the production that it is difficult to respond to the rapid development of the current situation, since even a day is a long time in politics. I decided to focus on writing so that I can mix my

thoughts and opinions into the story, conveying a state or feeling, instead of saying something flat, direct, and disposable.

Well, basically, even if you don't look for politics, it will find you. You can't hide from it; politics affects us the most. It also plays an important role in my work. But you are right. Not everyone can see it or feel it. Sometimes my friends would be surprised and respond with, "I can't see any political meaning in your work. It's just a funny sex video."

To be honest, once the work is out there, how to interpret it is not my concern, and sex as well as humor are also my focuses. Sex, in fact, is one of the important elements (in my work). I often employ the notion of it to shroud other circumstances and seldom discuss the act of having sex itself. Sex carries a lot of primitive emotions, many of which are deeply rooted in the idea of humanity. Being 'in the moment of pure joy' could strip away all your dignity, values and inhibitions. It can get you to confess your greatest shame. So, it is essential for humans to have this moment in order to regain what we have lost through all the social-political conventions.

I pay a lot of attention to all sorts of political ideas and ideologies, both from the left and right, extreme political correctness, online chatters, etc., all of which often generate interesting conflicts and contradictions. We may not be able to notice how ridiculous some incidents are in our daily lives, but under these extreme scenarios, the absurdity and ridiculousness of human beings then become rather apparent. This is how I deliver my animated stories, and use humor as a way of defeating the world.

We, human beings nowadays, are putting a lot of pressure on ourselves, with all these responsibilities and obligations. We must be on our best behavior, as if we can be as noble as a Buddha, but when we take off our clothes, we are still animals. Sex, love, emotions, none of these has evolved over the past one or two thousand years (maybe they even regressed), despite the fact that all our surroundings have largely improved. What makes the Internet so wonderful is that it liberates humanity. For thousands of years, civilization has slowly moved forward, making us, human beings, more decent and courteous. It wasn't until the

arrival of the Internet—a place where almost no cost or obligation is required to express one's thoughts—that we began to leave traces of the most direct and honest human thoughts. If you take a look at the various behaviors on the Internet, you will see our clothed bestiality is being exposed all at once. It is not that the society is going backwards, but that humanity has always been primitive.

You mentioned *Who's the Daddy*. I believe I made it right after 'Occupy Central', when Hong Kong society had been torn apart. I was very interested in the political spectrum and found that it was impossible to survive as a centrist. All sides and everyone nowadays are expected or required to declare their stances. My writings over the last few years have been about my personal feelings and experiences. They are very intimate. To some extent, I feel that genuineness is the core value of my creation. The medium of animation also gives me more room to be honest, since I have noticed that no matter how truthful, boring, or morbid the stories are, the first reaction from the audience is always judgmental, probably because the image has this childlike naivety. Plus, the high-speed narration in subtitles takes away their time to digest. Interestingly and unexpectedly, this open honesty has also made my parents open up bit by bit.

Wong Ping's Fables, featured in an exhibition recently, is distinct from my other works. This time, instead of repeating all the clichés, I wanted to introduce 'reality' to children. These stories are connected to today's societies. I don't want to put emphasis on being good to your parents or spending more time with them, quite the opposite—we just don't have all the time in the world to spare and it is impossible to cherish or take care of everyone, such as yourself, your parents, your lovers and friends, your pets, and so on.

Take one of the stories in *Wong Ping's Fables I* for example—once when I was on a bus, I saw a cockroach scrawling up and down on a pregnant woman. As it happens that cockroach is my second greatest fear, I tried to pretend that I hadn't seen it, but I failed. My mind was spinning with all sorts of possibilities that made me struggle

with whether I should tell her, since her belly was so round that I was afraid that the moment of fright would lead to a miscarriage, even if that did not happen, her sudden scream could have distracted the bus driver and caused something equally unfortunate. When the cockroach was about to reach the woman's shoulder, I felt that I had to tell her. However, after running through everything in my mind, I walked to the upper deck of the bus as if all of this had never happened.

After running away, I was frustrated. Regardless of the many scenarios I ran through my head, I did nothing in the end. Is the process of thinking more important than the outcome? The battle went on in my mind when I was sitting on the upper deck. Looking back, that was also a reflection of the atmosphere in Hong Kong. The sense of powerlessness permeates all levels of society—every day the demonstrators keep discussing, researching, and reflecting upon tactics, but at the end of the day, they might not get any results; when they fail, nothing changes. However, if you measure this within the scope of history, these thoughts and ideas can indeed bring impacts on the later generations, hence the values in the long run. With all that being said, we still need to face the accumulating sense of powerlessness produced by all these failures.

