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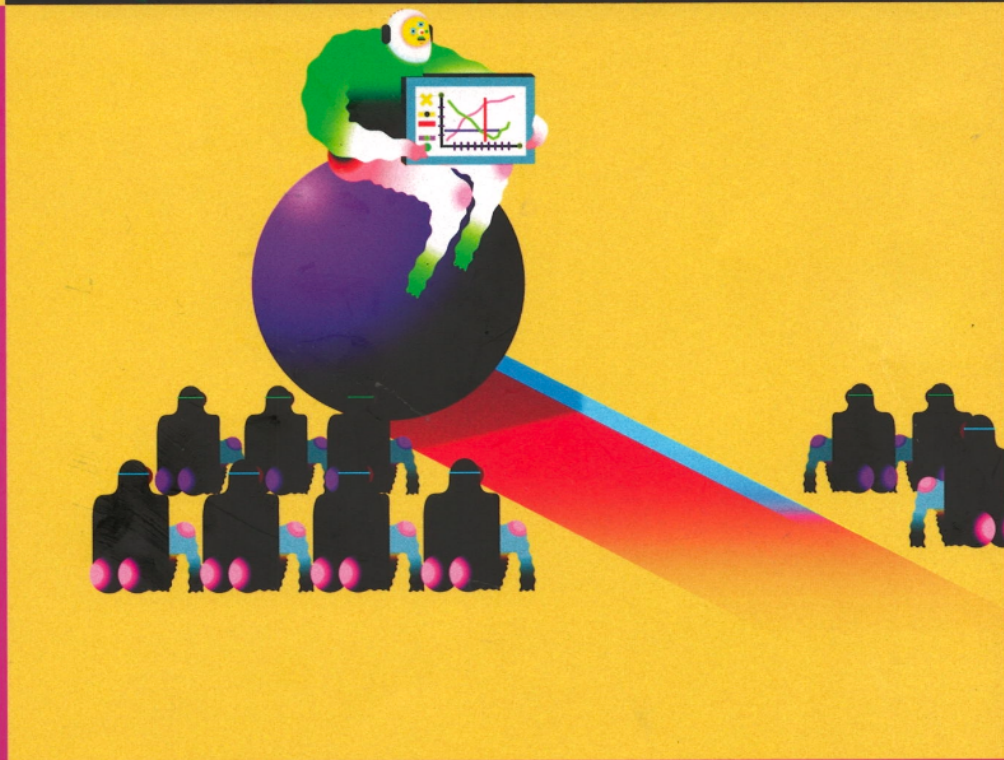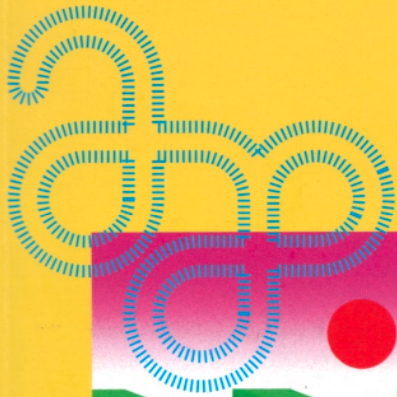"Wong Ping: Animating Absurdity"
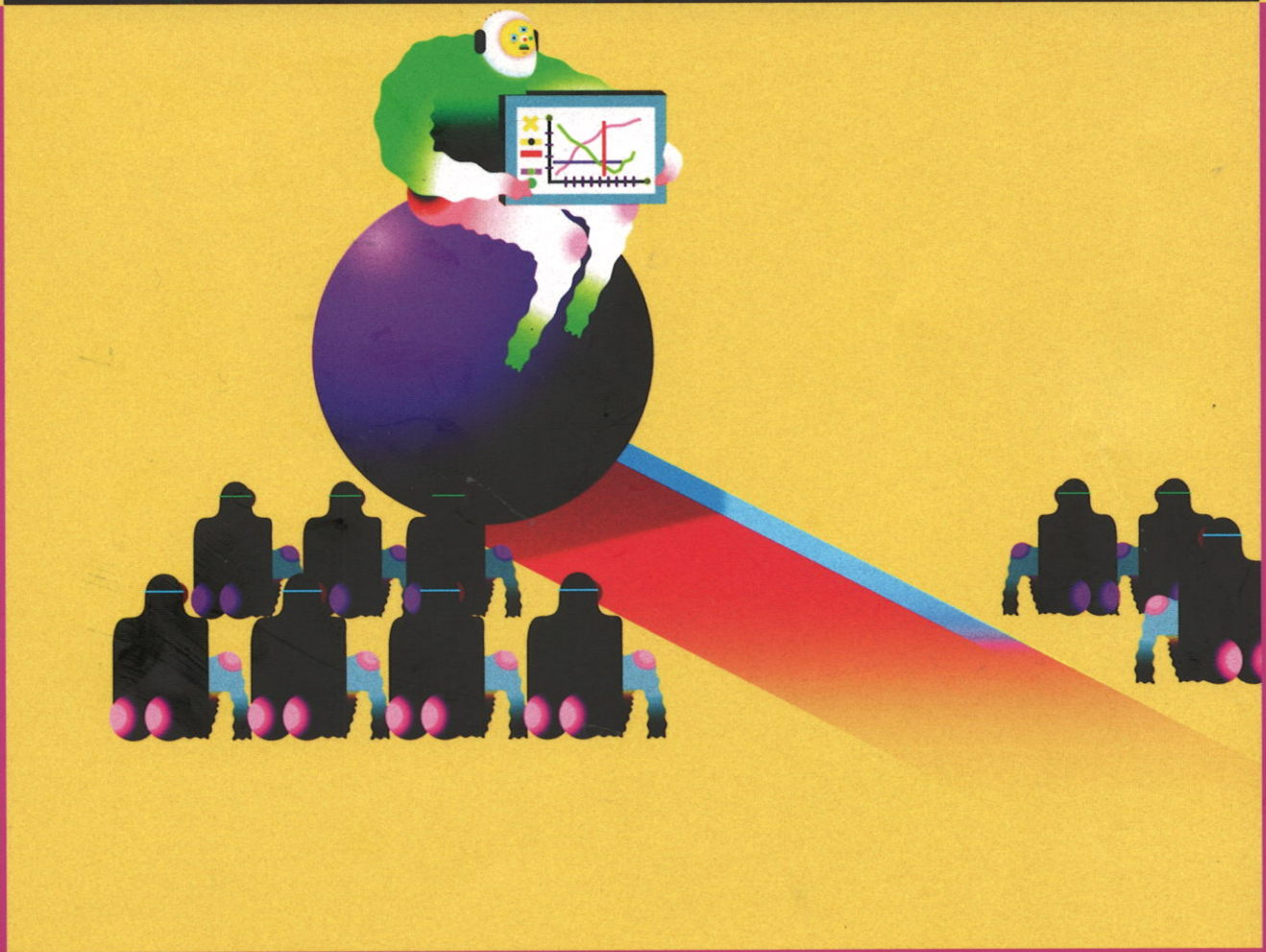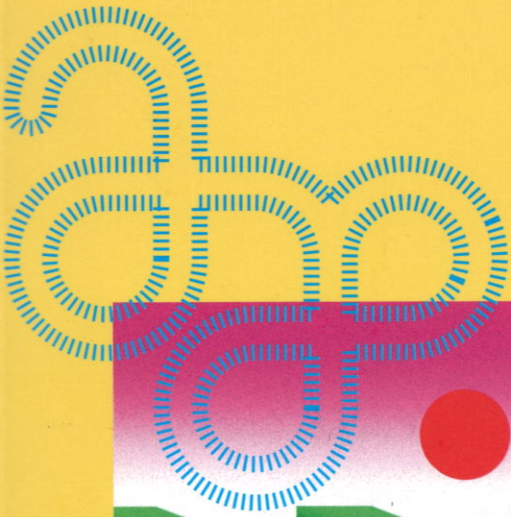Link: https://artasiapacific.com/issue/wong-ping-animating-absurdity

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Animating Absurdity Wong Ping

By Pamela Wong

Sorry for the late reply, 2021, still from single-channel video animation, color, with sound: 15 min. Image courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles.

Who's the Daddy, 2017, still from single-channel animation, color, with sound: 9 min 15 sec. Image courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue.

With a 100-word bio and a few images, how would you characterize yourself to appeal to potential dates? Would you include your hobbies or certain physical features that you're most proud of? Or would you opt for humor?

Despite how much "swiping" has changed the dating scene and the relationship patterns of an entire generation, so little has been said about how digitization and the virtual realms of the internet are reconceptualizing romantic relationships, how it has made us at once more sexually open and repressed, and how genuine connections with other human beings have become difficult on a new level. An early reflection on these changes came from Hong Kong animation artist Wong Ping. Just one year after Tinder's initial success in Asia, he released a nine-minute animation *Who's the Daddy* (2017), in which the male protagonist laments his "straight petite penis" and the political incorrectness behind the statistics. The rudimentary 8-bit-style graphic animation features rather brutal scenes such as the protagonist's eyeballs being stepped on by the heels of his female date, a "devoted Christian," whom he matches on the app. While making political jokes about swiping "left and right," the animation playfully captures the dynamics and rhythm of online dating: the pretense of the meet-up, the immediacy of the sexual act, and an urge to share—with a stranger—childhood memories in exchange for a moment of intimacy.

At one point, the protagonist started reflecting on his experience of sexual violence. The character acknowledges, "I realized my obsession with being conquered by power and violence; that shame of incompetence was my true value," and traces his struggles with manhood back to his relationship with his father. When the video was selected by curator Susanne Pfeffer as a part of the group exhibition "Performing Society:

The Violence of Gender" at Tai Kwun Contemporary in 2019, *Who's the Daddy* provided a counternarrative to balance the predominantly women-related discussions in gender studies that prevailed in the exhibition—though that was not Wong's intention. Nonetheless, the inclusion of *Who's the Daddy* in "Performing Society" felt necessary. The work serves as a quasi confession from a heterosexual man on fulfilling the societal expectation of becoming a breadwinner especially in the hyper-capitalistic environment of Hong Kong. That was my first encounter with works by Wong Ping, and I found some honesty in its reflections of the contemporary struggle with relationships.

Several years later, in 2023—when there are now even more options in the marketplace for dating apps—I asked Wong about his own opinions on the invention of the product. "I think the invention of Tinder is worth winning a Nobel Prize—if there is one for humanities or technology—because it dramatically accelerates the process of genetic exchange between different races. You have many more opportunities to meet people outside of your own circle and from different ethnic backgrounds. Quite a few of them get married eventually. It was a pity that my parents did not catch this trend—if they had, I'm pretty sure that I wouldn't exist today."

Connecting the dots between different themes and topics including sex, politics, violence, virtuality, and intergenerational wounds, Wong admits that, for him, the narrative structure in his animations is rather "ambiguous" as his primary aim is to discuss issues that he is particularly interested in within a short period of time. Oftentimes the protagonist is voiced by Wong himself—after being processed by computer software—blurring the line between fiction and reality. "Yes, there seems to be a lot of judgements, such as the ugly green Croc shoes in *Who's*

the Daddy, but I think in making these judgements, it gives birth to many other branches of discussion."

In Wong's videos these interwoven discussions are combined with his distinctive visual style. Hypersensitive to digital design, Wong incorporates nostalgic visual elements into his work, such as the cursor and Windows interface from the late 1990s, early SMS, and the sound effects and pixelation from Nintendo games together with his bold use of fluorescent colors, geometric compositions, and the outrageous imagery of flying genitalia. This visually procative style, memorable even to those who have seen his work only once, initially comes from his desire to "play," reflecting the origins of his animations, what he calls "a hobby after work." "When I first started making these animations, I really didn't have any references or techniques," he says. "The software was all I had. I still had a day job back then and I was satisfied playing with the colors and shapes." His earliest work, *No One Remains Virgin Under the Lion Crotch* (2011), features four "uncle" figures hopping around and singing dark lyrics that criticize the so-called "collective spirit of Lion Rock" (here humorously renamed as "Lion Crotch"), which fueled Hong Kong's economic growth in the golden age of the 1980s. In the video, the balding figures in "I ♥ HK" and "HK ♥ U" T-shirts are decapitated by a bomb launched from the vagina of "Lion Crotch." While Wong did not intend to subvert the general public impression
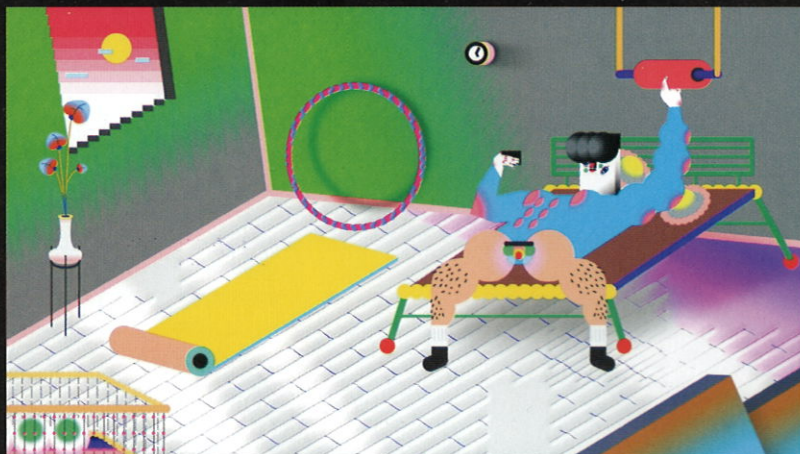
at the time of animation as "created solely for kids," the cruelty felt in *No One Remains Virgin* set the tone for adult audiences, resonating with those who struggle in the rat race for the sake of a city's success story.

But as Wong started collecting stories and materials from real life in an increasingly consistent manner, his scripts evolved and became more layered with a somewhat coherent storyline—despite how wild his imagination seems and how rapid his mind switches from topic to topic. *Stop Peeping* (2014), for example, tells the story of a man spying on a young woman living next door in a subdivided flat. He becomes obsessed, only to be disappointed after witnessing the girl's true personality when she sticks his gift of an ice lolly in her armpit and then spitefully tosses it away. Alongside the character's inner dialogue, the video also highlights the fragility of the boundaries between individuals living in a dense city, and how the in-between space offers room for misunderstandings that perpetuate these fantasies.

From Top to Bottom:
Under the Lion Crotch, 2011, still from single-channel video animation: 4 min 38 sec. Image courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue.

Who's the Daddy, 2017, still from single-channel animation, color, with sound: 9 min 15 sec. Image courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue.

Jungle of desire, 2015, still from single-channel video animation: 6 min 50 sec. Image courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue.

Stop Peeping, 2014, still from single-channel video animation: 3 min 48 sec. Image courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue.

The crossing of boundaries and the shrinking of living space become even more inescapable in *Jungle of Desire* (2015), the centerpiece of Wong's first solo exhibition in 2015 at the Hong Kong independent space Things That Can Happen. In this video, a wife decides she wants to become a prostitute and provides sexual services to a police officer at home to sustain a living, while her husband, suffering from chronic erectile dysfunction, hides in the closet and witnesses the act every day. While Wong questions the ideas of sexual virility and manhood, it eventually becomes a revenge story when her husband decides to perpetrate acts of sexual violence on the police officer after gaining the power of invisibility. In this problematic yet enduring

marriage, both the man and the woman suffer and eventually come to accept reality, despite the seemingly unconventional reversal of gender roles. Created one year after Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, it also reflects the underlying tension between the civilians and the police force at the time.

The plot twists in both *Stop Peeping* and *Jungle of Desire* quickly disrupt audience's expectations about the storyline. "People often compare animators to gods," Wong said, "because you get to decide all the characters' fates. You create an entire universe starting from just a blank piece of paper. This is perhaps the best thing about animations: I can design furniture, make sculptures, or do performances; I can do anything within this 16:9 space." With this freedom, Wong is not too concerned about having a fixed form and structure. He simply wants to "let the characters speak." Often, his visual characterization of them is realized through highlighting their distinctive biological features, habits, or fetishes, in a way that even if the audience doesn't remember their names or appearance, they probably will remember their peculiarities. In the examples of *Stop Peeping* and *Jungle of Desire*, both protagonists are obsessive voyeurs, with the latter almost able to cure his dysfunction after witnessing sex between his wife and the police officer.

The blank space of animation also allows for exaggeration, which can be seen as essential to Wong's tactic of humor. In another more fairytale-like example, *An Emo Nose* (2015), the main character has a Pinocchio-like nose, which is his only friend, and which lengthens whenever he becomes "emo" and depressed. Eventually, the emo nose becomes so far away that the main character waits for it to circle back to him after travelling around the world—perhaps a reflection of the chronic depressive state prevalent in modern society.

In subsequent videos in which Wong discusses sociopolitical issues more directly, exaggeration is almost like a thought experiment derived from daily life. Commissioned by Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York for the exhibition of artists from China and Hong Kong in 2018, "One Hand Clapping," the animated short *Dear, can I give you a hand?* (2018) explores the poor living conditions, discrimination, and household conflicts experienced by elderly people in Hong Kong, who often face the dilemma between living with their family and being transferred to elderly homes. Instead of approaching such heavy topics head-on through "close-ups," Wong's strategy is to come at them in "profile"—or sideways—by focusing on the elderly's physical needs and ways of entertainment, such as an elderly father's collection of vintage pornography VHS tapes, which he guards preciously while lusting after his daughter-in-law, and his perusals of the local park where middle-aged ladies offer prostitution services. These seamy depictions question the well-respected, Confucian image of the elderly in Asian traditions,

debunking the perception that they are always wise, asexual, and full of majesty—and instead revealing they are also excruciatingly human. In proposing internet-based solutions for issues caused by an aging population, the video further satirizes how the internet is even transforming the funeral business with the burial of the old man in "an online tomb"—for which his son forgets the login password and is unable to recover the account. For Wong, these seemingly absurdist "extreme situations" are based on everyday observations: "It is so easy for us to bypass these phenomena, but they exist, and I have only exaggerated them so that you will find them funny because of how absurd they seem."

A critical return to form, Wong's ongoing series *Wong Ping's Fables* (2018–) comprises compact stories, featuring animals or plant characters in urban settings— from communal spaces on the bus to a *cha chaan teng* restaurant and a prison—all painstakingly drawn by Wong. Voiced by an automated female voice instead of his own, each story includes a "moral" at the end—a core element of the narrative format—but one that is often snarky and politically incorrect, questioning the presumed moral standards and revolting against the idea of a "correct message" for the story to preach. "For *Fables*, I went to the

(Center) *Sorry for the late reply*, 2021, still from single-channel video animation, color, with sound: 15 min. Image courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles.

(Bottom left) *Sorry for the late reply*, 2021, still from single-channel video animation: 15 mins. Image courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue.
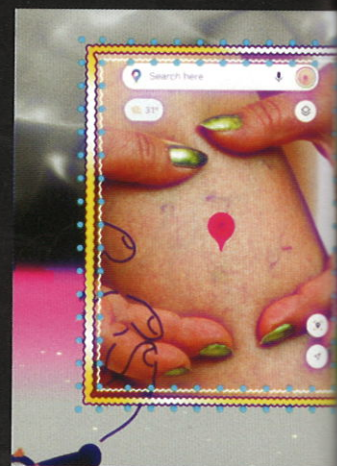
public library to check the famous collections such as Grimms' Tales or Aesop's Fables," Wong said, "but I was truly bored by the outdated lessons. I wanted to narrate truths that are contemporary to this era." Based on his daily observations, the story about a Tree character in the first episode, for example, unfolds as Tree (representing Wong in real life) spots a cockroach crawling on the body of a pregnant Mama Elephant. During the trip, Tree debates with himself whether he should notify her about the cockroach—but worries he will shock the woman, leading to either a potential miscarriage or a bus accident. In this animation of his story, Wong even imagines that Tree can communicate with the roach telepathically—but that also fails. Acknowledging his own cowardice in self-acceptance, Tree has a realization that flashes on screen: "To all righteous thinkers, perhaps it is worthwhile to spend more time considering how meaningless and powerless you are."

After *Wong Ping's Fables*, Wong realized that his scripts have become similar to those of standup comedies, which also cover hundreds of topics within just an hour. He admits that these days he doesn't really have "a direction to follow" for each video. This is most apparent in his recent video, the 15-minute *Sorry for the late reply* (2021), which resembles a stream-of-consciousness monologue captured during the pandemic. In the video, Wong as the protagonist is trapped in an old lady's body and the chaotic journey

(Top right) *Dear, can I give you a hand?*,
2018, still from single-channel video
animation: 12 mins. Image courtesy the artist
and Kiang Malingue.

(Bottom left) *Dear, can I give you a hand?*,
2018, still from single-channel video
animation: 12 mins. Image courtesy the artist
and Kiang Malingue.

is scattered with jokes, punchlines, and random associations, such as the similarity between lightning in the sky and the varicose veins on the woman's calves.

While people tend to think that Wong is "talking nonsense," he believes in the value of trash talk. The title of his exhibition "Earwax," curated by Hou Hanru at Berlin's Times Art Center last year, comes from his metaphor of earwax as information that one couldn't process but that often contains truths. Transforming the entire space into an organic body, audiences were first greeted by a copper, ear-shaped sculpture suspended in the air, with a hole that eerily evokes Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893). Walking downstairs, as if one is walking into Wong's ear canal, the audiences would hear the babbling words from Wong's earwax, which was "crumbling down" from the three-channel video *Crumbling Earwax* (2022). Incorporating his own image into mound of talking "earwax," the video serves as a release of Wong's thoughts and observations on sociopolitical issues, especially unpleasant truths collected during the protests in Hong Kong in 2019. Reflecting on this exhibition and his continued search for truth, Wong said, "Creating a work is like clearing the earwax for me, when I can finally empty all of my thoughts. I believe that anything that easily enters your brain is common sense, and I look for the 'earwax' that reveals to people what they neglected all along."

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