Screening Room No. 14: *A River in the Freezer*
A conversation with Wong Kit Yi with guest curator Erin Li

Erin Li
Hi Kit Yi.

Wong Kit Yi
Hi Erin.

Erin Li
So did you finally manage to get some rest after the crazy Hong Kong art week?

Wong Kit Yi
I slept in a bit more today, but I probably need another whole week to catch up on my beauty sleep.

Erin Li
Could you maybe tell us a little bit more about the performances, because this might be one exhibition where you've done the most performances?

Wong Kit Yi
You mean the performances in Hong Kong, right?

Wong Kit Yi
Funnily, my show in Hong Kong “+852 GHOST-JPG” actually opened at 11:11 am, on Saturday 23rd March. Maybe it was a sign that this is meant to be my immediate next project after the “+852 GHOST-JPG” exhibition. But about the performances, this time was different to previous ones. Usually for live performances, I’m the main person performing, reading out running subtitles and singing the songs, but this time we used a different format.

Erin Li
Yeah.

Wong Kit Yi
So for Art Basel Hong Kong week, basically we invited curator friends and artist friends, including Wang Tuo, X Zhu-Nowell, John Tain, Sissi Kaplan, Pi Li, Karen Cheung, Hera Chan and more, and had them voice the narrative lyrics to my latest karaoke lecture video “Dial 432 to See the Light”. I saw in the notes that you were asking about the backup singers in my performances. I thought that was funny, as though I’m a singer with an entourage. Many people call these narrators and singers performers. I prefer to call them my vocal athletes, because they’re running with the subtitles, moving through time with their own voice. It's quite funny, because even like physical athletes - some of them do end up sweating a lot after the performance. It really is exercise. Your eyeballs have to constantly catch up with the fast running subtitles, at the same as you’re narrating. It’s kind of intense. And this time the subtitles even disappeared soon after appearing, so it was even harder than normal. I chose not to be the main vocal athlete this time because I wanted to learn. I created the performance manual and I sent it out to seven groups of vocal athletes. And I let them interpret how the performance should be done in their own ways, based on my direction and guidelines. For example, some groups emphasized collectively reading certain parts, while some sang certain parts together. The last group wanted to create an ethereal vibe in response to the idea of the ghost image, so they put on a voice that was ghostly or spooky. It was an interesting experiment for them but also for myself to learn and expand the possibilities of new ways to narrate, speak and sing. Even not reading certain parts turned out to be an interesting narrative choice.

Erin Li
Especially because we probably don't call them professional performers. I see a lot of your art world friends, like curators or writers, people who come to the performance from different perspectives. So they probably have all sorts of quirky strategies that you have not thought about.

Wong Kit Yi
Yeah, yeah, definitely. I think, you know, one thing about karaoke that's interesting is that we all get to be a superstar for a moment in it. But then it's also about making mistakes together, right? Like running off key and not doing so perfectly but having fun together. Some vocal athletes are very specific and they want to get every single word right. But I usually tell them that, you know, it's about having fun together. And don't be stressed. I think not actually internalizing a lot for me is also important. When I do it myself, I usually do it more *lecture* style, and study more and rehearse more. And I try to internalize the text. But for this session, I'm inviting friends, and as you pointed out that they are not professional in that sense, right? They're curators, they're artists, but not professional performers. So I think that it's actually interesting to try the *karaoke* style and not aim to perform something perfectly. If I want it performed perfectly, I can just play the official audio (voiceover) of the video work. I don't need to invite other people. I think their imperfect performances actually create some kind of urgency or some kind of tension that is a lot more interesting than what you would get from a professional performance.

Erin Li
Yeah, I remember being in your live performances in different places, like Tai Kwun Contemporary and Tate. And every time when you kind of trip in your performance, that's actually when the audiences give a lot of reaction. They really feel engaged - they probably wouldn't fall asleep. But I remember, I think we talked about this one time, and you were saying, in the middle of your performance people start to kind of almost judge your performance, judge your ability, almost saying, 'oh, this artist can't even read her own script'. I think that's when a lot of emotions and opinions get triggered.

Wong Kit Yi
Right, I think, that time I was actually purposefully making the running subtitles extra fast so that I myself had a really hard time catching up. So it does....actually putting myself in that situation is not so fun for myself, but I

feel that definitely makes other people more engaged, because they're like, "oh my god, oh no, she missed that". And they kind of become a cheerleader or something. I still remember that time when I was doing the live karaoke lecture performance at Tate Modern, I don't know what happened, I did have a moment where I spaced out. I really did. And then when I came back, I was like, "oh, my God, I skipped that." And people actually laughed. I guess those moments are the part that you can't really plan, and that's the beauty of live performance, right? Because it's about not being able to *always* attain certain standards, or the standard is constantly shifting. And, the "accident", or the "mistake" or the "failure" become the interesting part.

Erin Li
On that topic, talking about these performances, and also the karaoke-inspired style that now almost…has almost become a signature style you have, video essays with running subtitles, and sometimes with live performance versions. Is this work "A River in the Freezer" the first one?

Wong Kit Yi
Yeah, it is special, it is the first one where I tried out the running subtitles. I started exploring this kind of aesthetic involving running subtitles or sing-along formats in 2015. It's not the first one that I tried to do the live performance with though. That one was called "Hong Kong Weather Modification Office (Square cloud), 2019" which later became part of the M+ museum collection.

Erin Li
Could you maybe talk a little bit about how you were inspired to create this format? I think for artists working with video, it's quite amazing when you find your own language and then people also recognise that.

Wong Kit Yi

I think language and text has been something that I've been very drawn to ever since I was in grad school. I did performances that involved language but not as intense as what I am doing now.

I guess we can try to be more focused talking about the video essay part - I like this karaoke-inspired sing-along format because it allows me to bring together historical research and cultural analysis. And, of course, personal stories as well. I tried a lot of different mediums. I was trained in painting when I was in undergrad, and then when I was in graduate school I was in the sculpture department, and I also used my body a lot as a medium. I thought a lot about documentation at that time. This video essay format works the best for me for now. I get a lot of people asking me 'why karaoke lecture, karaoke running subtitles'? I have two answers. For more general audiences, I will say, "I really like running subtitles in Karaoke because I relate to the idea of running with time, and the role time can play in the experience of a work of art, right?" By requiring the audience to keep up with the running subtitles in my work, I make them move with the work, which lends a degree of texture to the duration of the work itself. And when the text turns into running subtitles, the language itself becomes this very time-based thing. And the audience's eyeballs are being forced to move as if they're on the treadmill or something. But the other reason that I'm very drawn to this idea of running subtitles is also because I'm really interested in this idea of the double narrative.

So when I read certain words in my accent I do so with a certain intonation, you know stressing certain syllables. And I do so differently from the way, for example, native English speakers will when they read the same thing. For me that is interesting, because those stresses create meaning. It might sound like I'm asking a question or trying to be sarcastic, or being really firm or doubting, whether or not I mean to. Sometimes the difference can come down to something quite subtle. Meanwhile, a native English speaker will be reading out the subtitles in their head in a different voice with different intonations and stresses, which might suggest different meanings to those which my reading suggests. That's where the double narrative comes in.

Erin Li
It's almost like.... I don't know if you have this experience of texting people as a teenager, and then sometimes you just get into a massive misunderstanding because you misread the tone that's not present in the text itself, and then you fight over text when it's a misunderstanding.

Wong Kit Yi
Yeah, I definitely am very interested in that kind of complexity in language and tonality.

Erin Li
I think a key reason why I thought it would be amazing to curate this work for the online screening room, is because I've never done this kind of curating for an online screening room before and because you can almost engage anyone internationally, the questions are very difficult - it's like "how do I narrow down all these artists I like, into one person. Okay, let's try to think about something super engaging to watch even on a home computer screen setting, or even on a phone setting when you're maybe commuting".

I remember when I watched this video, there are certain moments where I was just at home and I was almost singing along. And maybe this kind of experience, if I were in that physical exhibition room with lots of other audience, I would not be that comfortable to do that. But then this would actually give you a more intimate relationship with the work. And then another reason is because having been to a lot of your live performances, or watched your work in exhibition settings, sometimes I feel I really want to pause or rewind, which I can't do in that setting, so having it online and to be able to be like "wait what did she just say?", to be able to do that and play with your own pace of narrative - this new way of engaging with your work I guess.

So I saw that your latest work is currently on view at The Kitchen - so I guess my other question is how does this format of online screening work for you? If The Kitchen one was the first experience doing that?

Wong Kit Yi
Yeah it is. The Kitchen is the first time I'm presenting my work online. Okay, so basically there are three formats: 1) the live performance, 2) the video being played in a physical exhibition, and then 3) an online presentation hosted by the website of an organization.

I think each format has its own advantages and disadvantages. Say for the live performance, I like it in what you might call an abusive way; there are kind of unspoken rules, such as once you decide to attend a live event/performance in a theater/gallery space, or in a small room or whatever, you kind of don't dare to walk out of the room in the middle, right? Because it's kind of rude, or not polite or whatever. So I like that in a way you're signing a social contract once you say you will come to my live performance; you're sorta being forced to watch the whole thing, whether willingly or unwillingly. I guess you can sleep through the whole thing, but of course I hope when people are coming they will try to engage with the performance. In terms of my recent works, I do prefer people to watch from the beginning to the end. So this is a way to make sure that people get to go through the most of my video essay, hopefully without snoozing. Regarding the physical exhibition format, to take "A river in the Freezer" as an example, I think that work was more poetic, so it almost didn't matter so much if you dropped in early, or in the middle, or later. It's kind of more lyrical and the logic is relatively not as tight as those of my later works. I think my recent works are more tightly interwoven, so if you miss a certain connecting part, then you might be a little bit lost in between. That's why I prefer to have a live performance-based presentation for the newer works. But again I think each format has its advantages. In the physical exhibition, people might not have as much in the way of expectation. When they walk into the gallery, they don't know what they're going to get or not get. So there is more flexibility and freedom for the audience to choose how much they consume or don't consume. Sometimes this kind of encounter with work can result in surprises.

And for the online version, I like what you just said about having a super intimate one-on-one relationship with the artwork. I think a lot about video distribution nowadays. A lot of my friends tell me "I didn't get to watch this and that film of yours. So where can I see it? When is the next performance?" I present work in Hong Kong or New York or elsewhere, and it's hard to make sure people don't miss your work when everyone has a busy schedule. So I'm drawn to these online programmes where people can drop in whenever they want to within the month. Particularly because I don't otherwise get to circulate my work so much in a European context. When I did the Tate Modern live performance I think almost one year ago, it was great to hear the feedback from people who were able to watch my work outside the US/Asia. So the online programmes provide a good opportunity for me to circulate my work outside of the American and East Asian context. Also, I do find that my recent projects can be quite demanding on the audience's attention, as there are nuanced ideas and sudden turns and free association. So I understand people sometimes wanting to maybe think a little bit about what I just said before moving forward, and I guess the possibility of pausing or rewinding will be appealing for certain audiences. They can wait til they're ready, then click play and move forward. So I really like when you say it is an even more personal experience, because it's a performance that the audience has full control of when it comes to going or stopping, and yes they can perform for themselves by reading the subtitles out loud, or like you, singing them out loud. I mentioned that, you know, maybe some people when they watch the subtitles, they use their inner voice to voice out their own sound, but when you're looking at it you get to read it out just like we read things aloud when we were little. So that provides for an even closer relationship with the work, which I think the live performance situation or the physical exhibition situation might not.

Erin Li

Especially the musical parts. Because it's quite attractive and also sometimes the lyrics are repetitive so you almost feel like "Oh, I get the gist

of this part. I can sing along.” Also, because particularly in “A River in the Freezer”, there are quite a couple sections that has music

Wong Kit Yi
I think there are five musical sections in that. And the latest work that I just presented in the Hong Kong show has three music sections.

Erin Li
Yeah. So that's another reason why I thought it would be really nice to revisit this older work in this setting. And another question I wondered before but didn't get a chance to ask is when you came to Tate for the performance, you were kind of recruiting performers and you asked me “Oh, do you know anyone?” and I said “so what's the requirements?”, and then you actually gave very specific thinking around the accent or what kind of voice you might be imagining - so what's your logic for each of your performances or even in the video work? For instance in “A River in the Freezer”, you involved multiple narrators and sometimes they overlap - they read something together or sing something together, sometimes individually, or sometimes it's your own voice. How do you choreograph this?

Wong Kit Yi
After "A River in the Freezer" I actually started to think a lot about accents. Because in "A River in the Freezer" I used my own voice and I was working with musicians in the work. And I thought it really makes sense to have their voices narrating the spoken parts as well, you know, then when they come to the singing part it would be less distracting. And since I was narrating certain parts, I also sang parts of the songs too, just to provide additional vocal layers. It just felt natural to do it that way. Then after "A River in the Freezer", I started considering more carefully who should be the voiceover person, who should sing what parts, and also what accents should be employed? For the live performance at Tate, one of the requests for my vocal athletes was that they should have an accent that is neither American or British, but a somewhat, you know, transatlantic kind of accent. I purposefully wanted to challenge the norm of oral narration in the

English speaking art world, which usually features American accents or very BBC accents.

Erin Li
And is that something related to your experience of living in the US for many years?

Wong Kit Yi
When I first graduated from the Yale MFA program, I learned about some classes designed to help you remove your “foreign” accent and put on a native one. At one point I was like “oh, you know, I really want to blend in. I really want to have an American accent, and pronounce my words with the right emphasis on the vowels”. For a certain period of my life, I really wanted to fit into a certain system. But then later, I felt like this is me, no matter how many years I live in the US, I will have my Chinese accent.

Instead of trying to change myself, I should just embrace who I really am. Because accent is something that is very much tied to where you're from right? So I feel, actually, instead of removing it, I want to emphasize it. Indeed, every single person has an accent, so I just don’t think it’s fair that certain American accents are more appropriate for certain things or certain British accents are more appropriate. I like to try to challenge or subvert that kind of hierarchy.

Erin Li
Could you also talk a little bit more about the work - because I think I noticed recently, a lot of your work seems to be related to a residency or a research trip, and this is also the case with "A River in the Freezer" when you went to the Arctic Circle - so could you just explain how this research expedition happened and also what kind of research you conducted before the trip?

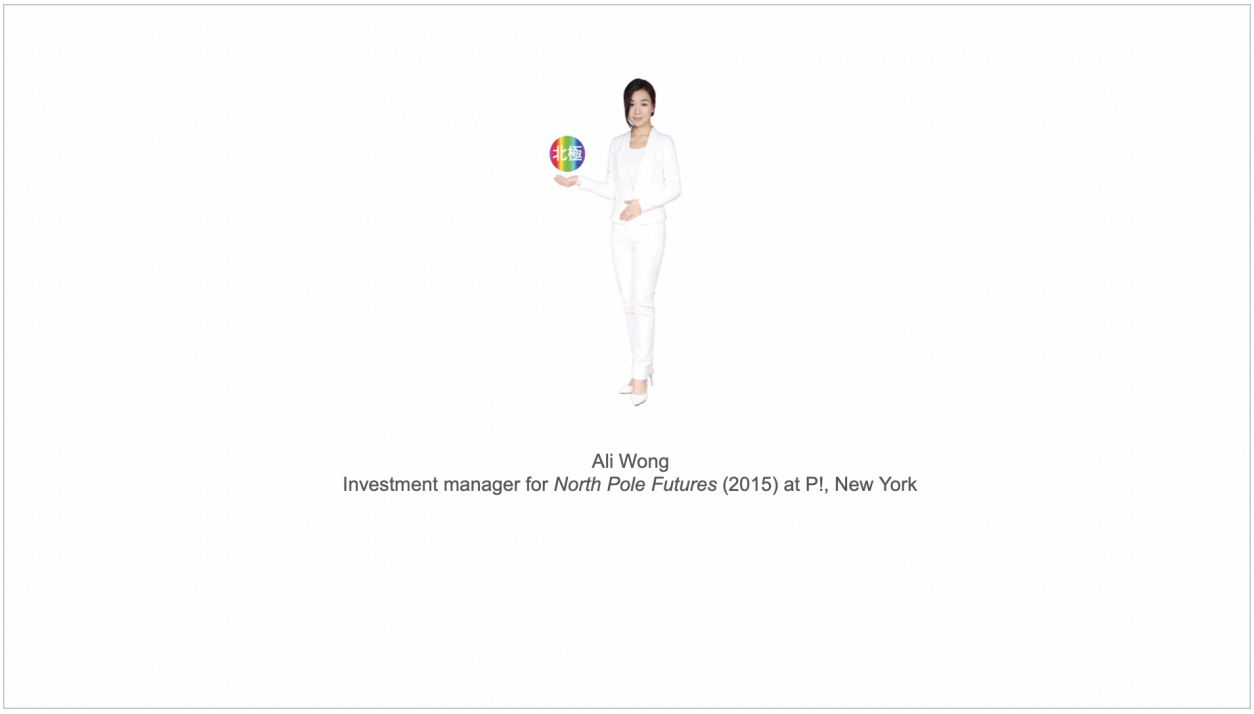
Wong Kit Yi
That's interesting. I mean, it's funny that 11:11 is kind of posting and hosting my video. It’s as if in addition to me myself, my video is also having a

one-month residency programme too. But anyhow, I'm actually not so interested in residency programmes normally, just because I'm too lazy to move around. Only if there is a very strong reason for me to go to a particular place will I definitely want to go.

So “A River in the Freezer” is a work that I created after the Arctic Circle sea residency programme in 2015. It's almost nine years ago. I think I have always been very drawn to extreme conditions. The Arctic Circle was somewhere with such conditions that I had never been to. The same with the desert where I did the Chinati Foundation artist in residence program in 2021/2022. Again, you know, I don't think I was doing a lot of residencies in between those two. It’s the extreme places that draw me in the hopes of understanding the world better through them. The Chinati Foundation artist in residence program was founded by Donald Judd in 1986, which is right by the Mexico border, a 180 mile open border, with no fence or anything. There are checkpoints though. And I was very drawn to the meteorological border that actually passes through the national borders. To be more specific, the meteorological border is not between Texas and Mexico (though that national border is of interest to me too). The meteorological border passes through both of them, but it’s between the moist air that comes from the Gulf of Mexico in the east and the drier air that comes from the west. The collision of the moist and dry air is what creates the dynamic weather conditions. Thinking back about all these residency experiences and field trips, ultimately, it is also not just about that place and what is around that place, but also about where I am from. It’s like no matter where I go, I feel like my reference point is always going to be my hometown Hong Kong. For example, in "A River in the Freezer" I start with “Living in semi-tropical Hong Kong, I always got charged $2 extra to have ice in my drink.” I just can’t get rid of my point of reference, which ends up getting compared and contrasted with where I visit.

Erin Li
Did you imagine what kind of work you want to make out of this trip?

Wong Kit Yi
This project is a lot about me trying to find enough money to go on this residency, because it's quite expensive. And I did have some support from the Jerome Foundation, they paid for part of the expenditure. But I started back then in 2015 with a project called “North Pole Futures”, which was about selling promises, because I was going on this very expensive sea residency programme, which allowed me to travel within 10 degrees of the North Pole (you know, North Pole is a point in the water).



Ali Wong
Investment manager for *North Pole Futures* (2015) at P!, New York

In order to fund this very expensive residency, I had this manager, an investment manager, Ali Wong, who also happens to share the same physical body with me, and she was offering collectors a chance to commission customized work of art before I go on this trip. Of course, Ali and I have never been seen in the same room, but we are both on zoom here today with Erin.

Erin Li
Right.

Wong Kit Yi

And the project opened at P! gallery on Apr 12 in 2015.





So you can see how it looked like. And the collector could actually pick three things from the pre-select list. The first was a date between October 7 to 18, whether am or pm. The second thing was a colour. And then the third thing was a strange, weird English word. So the collector pays for the contract in advance, they pay for it first, without knowing what kind of work they would get from me. You know, they were basically buying a piece of paper from me. So on the contract, there are small terms. One of them was basically whatever trash I make for you, you have to take it. There's no refund and if I die there or get eaten by a polar bear, the contract will not be valid anymore. So don't go after my family. And you know, you can basically see the contract on the wall. And then this is basically the wall across the one that has the contract on it. And this is basically the formula.

$$K = \frac{0.4\lambda e^{\pi}}{t}\sqrt{\omega^{-\ln 2} + \frac{1}{9.8\mu}} + r + \alpha\beta\,,$$

$$S = K(12 - \omega)\%$$

K = Delivery price of artwork
S = Contribution to non-profit art community
λ = Snowfall
t = Temperature
ω = Sunlight working time index
μ = Moon illumination
r = Random number ranging from 1 to 60
α = Artist acclimation
β = Base price of artwork
$e \approx 2.718281828$ .....
$\pi \approx 3.141592654$ .....
$\ln 2 \approx 0.69314718$ .....

So as I said, you know, the collector basically makes the selection. They choose three things from the pre-selected list, and then they sign the contract and then they pay me the money first. And the price of each contract is different. The price is kind of determined by this very complex calculation that factors together weather conditions, snowfall, sun cover, moon illumination and other random variables. And if a contract is sold, a very small percentage of it, around 7.7 to 10% of the sale, is to be donated anonymously by me to a nonprofit organization. So I was also interested in engaging and interacting with the real world, even though the basic project premise is about not fitting in the economic models that kind of currently, you know, prevail in the art world.

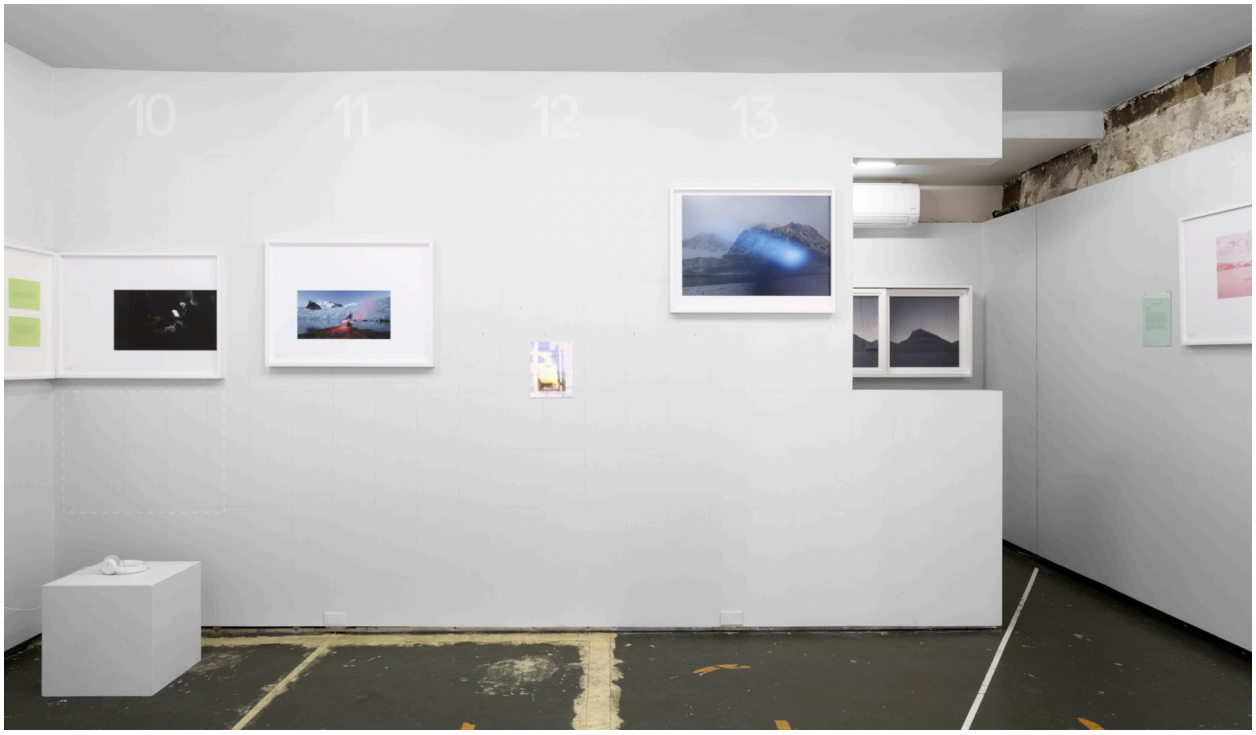
Erin Li
Did you make an exhibition before the trip to fundraise with all these ideas, and then the sales of this exhibition already predetermined some of the things you have to do when you are out there?

Wong Kit Yi
Yeah definitely - I made a show before that which was a fundraising project. So you're right, I had a basic structure where the work would partly be dictated by the collectors' selections. I would say that they were involved in kind of creating the work as well. The work was not entirely up to me, it was to be partly inspired by what the collectors picked. And then I interpret that. And in that show, I also featured a video interview with selected experts including an art dealer, a commodity trader, a pawn broker, and a fishmonger. So I got inspiration from them by learning about the nature and the techniques of valuation, and pricing in their industry. So instead of simply letting the art market absorb the art, I wanted to employ the art market as a part of my artistic process. And I was trying to see if there is a way to have another small alternative model for a healthier cultural ecosystem by redefining the collector and artist relationship. I feel that a lot of time when the collector goes to the art fair or the gallery, they just buy the work without being able to actually involve themselves more in the conversation/creative process. And through that project I had seven

collectors. I would say then they were more like the patrons rather than collectors when it came to supporting this project.



Fast forward two years after the first show, and in 2017 at the same place around the same time, I had my second solo exhibition “Futures, Again,” which displays the fruit of the journey, seven commissioned works including the new karaoke essay film "A River in the Freezer".





Yeah, so you see, basically to complete the work the above pictures were hung on the wall, arranged along it in a kind of timeline spanning from the

7th to the 18th of the October 2015 residency. So they kind of represent a moment from the past that is now, you know, made visible.

Now I want to focus on this one of my resulting works.

This is one of the resulting works called *October 8, 2015, p.m. / Argus-eyed / Gold*, in which eight performers with pinhole cameras faced eight cardinal directions, at 79°,37,1 N, 011°29,4 E.



On the second day of my Arctic adventure, I asked my fellow travelers, which included a mix of artists and scientists, to stand in a circle facing eight cardinal directions while holding my pinhole cameras. I was worried about very practical stuff because the battery of the digital camera died out very, very easily in extreme cold conditions. So I thought that it would be fun to work with pinhole cameras since they only require light and time. So both the performance and the resulting photo became the actual realization of *October 8, 2015, p.m./ Argus-eyed/ Gold*. Another interesting thing is that I feel like time is very valuable there because the daylights are much, much shorter and very limited. We were basically losing 20 minutes of daylight every day. And my fellow travelers also had their own project to do, so convincing them to help me with my project was very tricky. And you know, there's no North Pole money so I couldn't even pay for their labor and money doesn't really matter there because you know, there's no place

we can spend it, and there's no Wifi and they cannot even do online shopping or anything. So I ended up proposing to them that if they agree to help me, in exchange, I would give each of them a shoulder massage, which I'm super good at, and for the exact amount of time as their performance. Plus they got to drink my whiskey; I had a bottle of Japanese whiskey which is sorta rare. So in a way alcohol is a kind of North Pole currency there.



Oh, one thing I didn't mention and that really excited me is that "A River in the Freezer" is very inspired by the world's northernmost settlement, called Longyearbyen. If you watch the video you will find out later it is where by law no one is allowed to die. Life and death kind of elements have been very embedded in my work even before I was aware of it. They're in "A River in the Freezer" and also in my latest work "Dial 432 to See the Light", in which I talk about TV funerals as a kind of collective ritual, and about whether certain audio frequencies open our third eye and enable us to see the unseen.

People ask me, you know, what kind of stuff do you research about? And I think I saw on my Wikipedia page, which someone kindly created for me, that I'm supposed to be a research-based artist. But honestly, I don't know what I research about. And I think what motivates me to move forward is that I don't understand. I don't exactly know what that is. So I'm constantly searching, searching. I'm more of a search-based artist.

Erin Li
Yeah I think a lot of your work also connects a lot of everyday observations and musings. How do you hold all these thoughts in your mind… (do you) journal? And when one project or one video essay.. when you have a rough concept… do you kind of then draw all these different elements together and then make a "time salad", as you say?

Wong Kit Yi
Yeah time salad. My facebook username is busy-making-time-salad. So definitely for every single project I start with a Google Doc. And I guess one important process for me is that I really rely on playing devil's advocate in my head - you know I will have one voice saying that "oh, you know, I think this is the direction you should go," but then the other voice will be like, "no, this is not going to work." So I am constantly contradicting myself. It's a process of identifying what I really need and what direction I should go forward in or not go forward in. But I guess my work, you know if I tried to capture my process in one sentence it would probably be, "my work is often driven by what is unknown, un-understandable and unseen". I think about those intangible things a lot. And again, Google Doc. I end with a Google Doc here today.

Erin Li
Yeah, I feel like we could keep chatting for longer, hope we get to do a more proper catch up another time.

Wong Kit Yi
Definitely. Thank you for having me.

Erin Li
And we also say bye to the investment manager who is also on this chat.

Wong Kit Yi
Okay she says bye to you.