Screening Room no.3: For (working title)
A conversation between artist Aaron Tan and residency 11:11 facilitators Alex Bell and Giulia Shah

Giulia Shah
Hi, Aaron, we're really excited to have you for our next screening room screening. Aaron you will be showing your film “for”. We recently met in Scotland at the Scottish Sculpture Workshop. So learn quite a bit about your work and you. It was really nice to meet you and get to know your work. We are really excited to speak to you more today about specifically your film “for" that you're showing. Maybe we can start off very generally, if you can just tell us a little about the video that we're screening at the moment.

Aaron
Oh, well, firstly, thank you for the invitation you two. It's a real pleasure to be hosted on your platform.

I’ll begin by talking about the video. It sort of came about through a series of very fraught experiments on zoom, during lockdown, or the lock downs that we've had.

I am doing a PhD on an artist and his museum. It's called the LYC Museum, which ran from 1972 to 1983, for 10 years, and it was set up by the artist Li Yuan-chia. Li was an artist that was born in China in 1929, and fled to Taiwan during the Chinese civil war and then moved up to Cumbria to set up the LYC Museum. I think he moved to Cumbria in 1968.
It was really a kind of a social practice before, you know, before it was named and tamed as such. And so my research was kind of premised on a lot on the social and participation, or at least, what it means to participate and engage in a live setting. And so with the pandemic that was made very difficult. So I started doing all these zoom performances. It was basically testing out the platform that we were all inhabiting, and trying to see how the social could be redirected, in a way, within those interfaces. It was

difficult because I had no control of the medium. I was pushing it to an extreme in a way. I was asking people to unmute the mics, and things were going out of hand. I had no way of calibrating the work because I was also switching between the screen sharing format and presenter format. So there were a lot of things that were very frustrating. And so what ended up was that I had all of this material that was left behind that I didn't know what to do with. And after a couple of months, I think I started working on a moving image timeline, also folding in other materials that I filmed along the way. And it became this film that I'm working on. It's in progress. I'm not sure whether it's finished.

But yeah, that's quite a long story. But yeah, if that makes sense. That's the kind of backstory of the of the work

Giulia
That really feeds into my interest in your use of moving image and where it sits in relationship to documentation, a material process, your artist practice and a finished work. I really liked how you were explaining that a lot of the materials that are used in the film are remnants of live performances that you did on zoom. So there is sort of this thing that happens between the remaining materials and then there's like this new form, which is the film. So yeah, I'm interested to know a little bit more about that and where this specific moving Image work is situated within that?

Aaron
Yeah. Wow, this is a really complex question, which I'm also interrogating, in my practice and the research. I think on the most immediate level myy entry point into Li and the LYC museum.. a lot of it was mediated through his archive which is housed in an institution in Manchester called the John Rylands institute. And you know, with these institutions, you have to kind of request for permission to access it. But essentially what the materials are is the leftovers of Li’s practice, or Li’s life in the museum/ house. Basically, when the museum closed, he kind of stayed in the building for many years after. So a lot of it is just his belongings and stuff. So going through these things, it was clear to me that I was interested in thinking about the

leftovers or the after-lives of those materials and how I can engage.. or re-engage with the stuff-ness of these things in the research. And in my own practice, I deal with leftovers as well, in a different way but I use materials that are often leftovers—I find materials that are abandoned and discarded. So there was something about trying to enter into Li, and the museum through these leftovers by combining my own kind of archive, which is the leftovers, with his archive. So that's one thing, if that makes sense. How to kind of, in a way, deal with the materials and their temporalities.

And moving to the digital I think, especially within zoom, when everything is live but also recorded. And there is a different format to like, say, I don't know, a normal archive, I guess. And I was interested in trying to work through the digital and the materialities and the temporalities in the digital to kind of generate a type of liveness that is not live, if that makes sense. Coming after the event,coming after the LYC Museum, what does that mean? And coming after the zoom performances, how do you re-engage with those materials in a different way to reformulate a different type of liveness, in which different temporalities can touch each other.

And I guess yeah, working through those materials, I hope at least that that was somewhat present. Or even absent. I mean, I was really interested in those disconnections and connections.
Thinking about like, those very fraught experiments on zoom where the technology will fail and something that we encounter many times in trying to kind of inhabit this new space is that they do fail and I think incorporating those failures was also very interesting in trying to think through what co-presence means in relation to Li, but also in relation to everyone, if that makes sense.

Giulia
I like this idea of creating a liveness and isn’t live because that's something that I really sensed watching the video. I felt like—I think I described this previously to you—I felt a bit like being a fly that's flying around a studio

space and this sort of micro and macro thing but I feel like I'm the one in the moment skimming, scanning the space Yeah, so I think that idea of liveness that isn't live… as a viewer I'm not fully aware of it's not liveness basically. So that's just a comment...that definitely comes across.

Alex
Something else that I think I'm responding to is what you're saying is this kind of combining leftovers or collections or archives of different moments in time. So some are like longer periods of time for collecting like your leftovers, and then with an archive of Li that's been kind of built over a longer period of time, in a different period of time. So like in the past, perhaps. And then these live moments that are happening in the present into the future.
I'm interested in how you kind of use this film to combine elements and kind of collaborate with different people and archives and material together and how you see that sitting together?

Aaron
Yeah, it's, again, very complex, big questions!

We did speak briefly, I think about like this collaboration with Li, that we are hosting in a way, I think. And what does it mean to collaborate with something that's no longer living? Someone who's no longer living? And what does it mean to work through the affects and materials and gestures? And yeah, of this, this person that is no longer around?

I suppose there's a type of inhabitation, like a way of working with someone—and I think that's interesting, also, in relation to your practice—What does it mean to cohabit? and to share something without any distance? And I think it's kind of a tricky question, especially when a person is no longer around. And it kind of goes back to myself in a way. And that's why I think at the moment, in the film, when my name appears within that zoom format—it was like a projection with my name in it—I

edited the film so as to kind of not reference Li explicitly. And the only way to do that was to reference myself, to fold myself into it.

And working through these materials, and affects and gestures, there's something about a shared ecology, that I'm trying to kind of manifest as an invitation, I suppose, or type of hospitality. But then I guess those attention economies that I wasn't speaking actually about but was thinking of earlier; how we can create spaces within the attention economies that we so much, you know, kind of have to immerse ourselves in, and how those spaces can be opened up within that, I suppose. There were moments in the film where I was interested in the analogue and digital, actually, I screen shared a video of Li, an 8mm film that he did, which is kind of like an environmental, kind of landscape shot of the Pennines which is just where he is at in Cumbria. And then there are moments where you can see my screen that was in the top right corner, which is, again, the zoom format. And I was also kind of working within my own environment, which is in the studio. And I was also projecting.... So there are like multiple screens happening at the same time. And I wasn't really interested in this moment where there was a signal that came on and said "your mouse has disconnected". And these moments of like, failure but also connections—in this case, the connection between the digital and the analogue kind of happening—and this is all chance. It's not something that I really planned. I guess I'm sort of looking out for those moments in which those things can all come together, in tension to each other in a way but then also somehow touch each other...

Alex
This kind of collaging together of different types of footage, the digital and analogue and these different moments, and also different scales and viewpoints. I'm also really interested in the sound element of that because that really kind of touched me throughout the film. Because the sound also is kind of changing, like overlapping and over layering, and kind of brings you in, and then makes you feel like you're somewhere else as well. And sometimes it's quite jarring or has different connotations. And that kind of also reacts with the imagery on the screen. And I was just wondering if you

could talk a little bit about the sound and also how you considered the sound while making this film.

Aaron
Yeah, the sound is always like the hardest thing for me in editing videos. I'm not the best with sound. And I often use like, ambient sounds, feeding in through the work, whether it's the camera or in this case the zoom. But then it sort of structures the video. So yeah, a lot of the sounds as I said, are kind of ambient sound, things that I was playing around with. Either through feeding in something through the speaker's, an external speaker that was then captured within the computer, or like the radio sounds. The bit, where at the beginning, when there's a voice that comes on, that speaks about the pandemic, that was from the radio, and that was by chance, but I really wanted to anchor the film at that moment. I guess, like you said, Alex, there's something about how the sound can operate to draw you in. And there are certain moments that I liked using the sound almost like a drone...it just keeps repeating the same thing. I think that was the moment where it goes into the so-called Museum, which is this space that I created, like a scale model of the Museum, which has different rooms and stuff and the camera goes through the space. And that's kind of like, that sound was like a drone, and it was very repetitive. But then I guess my impulse is always to cut it. And to kind of like, interrupted it, so I was just trying, basically working with the sound to kind of push and pull attention. And also to see how it structures the different vignettes and how they can connect with each other. It really is the connective tissue, I suppose, between the different spaces in the film. And yeah, I just, I guess, really just really interested in just how they can move, you know, and how we can move with the sound, if that makes sense.

Giulia
I'm really interested in that, in how you speak about movement and how you use sound, maybe in a way also to direct the viewer in a way that is not visual or tangible, necessarily, in that way. And I feel like the sound also makes you really aware of, or aware in a sort of confusing way as well of the space that the video is set in.

I feel like space plays a really important role in your work, like how you inhabit your own spaces, how materials inhabit those spaces, but also how you inhabit someone else's space. Like in this instance, with Li. I mentioned this before to you, that I was watching you moving around the space when we were in Scotland together, and you were moving things around and altering your space and zooming in and out and magnifying certain elements that you find around you, which you really see in the video as well. And I was wondering, what is the influence of space is in your work and like the way you move in space and this idea of movement?

Aaron

Yeah, a lot of it is not conscious, you know. A lot of it is just kind of a way of inhabiting space and I don't know how particular it is. But there's certainly like you mentioned certain ways of, modulating the space, of inhabiting it in order to alter it. And, and yeah, space is super important to the practice. It's almost like highly dependent on it. It's like every time I work in a physical space or not, I often try to interrogate it. And then in the same sense that I tried to interrogate the zoom spaces. But also I think from that, that where I think my interests lie in spaces is actually the kind of psychic spaces that we generate on a daily basis, that we inhabit. They're there but we don't question it. And I guess that's what I was referring to, as I was saying it's not conscious. It's like, I don't know, creating another layer, I suppose...it's a way of approaching those spaces, if that makes sense. And I think that's where the body comes into play, which Giulia you were referring to in terms of movement. But I think there's something that I wanted to speak about earlier and is this kind of like movement and the migratory which relates heavily to Li and his practice —not to go too much into his biography— it was a migratory existence, I suppose. He moved to different countries in his life, due to civil war, but also due to.. what he calls in search of "space and freedom", and ended up in Banks, which is a rural Hamlet of Cumbria where he set up the museum.

And even though it was cited and embedded within the rural ecology, the museum was actually a manifestation of his 'cosmic point' which was this kind of his own, How do you say, I guess personal philosophy that was very

influenced by Eastern philosophy and so and in essence it was about movement even though it was really embedded within that site and place. I think I was really interested in that and it's something that is present in my work I suppose, that it has a strong relationship to the place or the context and it situates itself and but also is about movement.

Alex
Yeah. And it's interesting you say that about the drone sound, coming back to the previous question, because I kind of when I was listening to it, I picked up on it, it really stuck with me, I thought it was like a metal detector—I think maybe I thought that because of all these kind of close up scanning shots—so I felt like some kind of detection and trying to find some kind of connection to something like a searching of. And with all these kind of pieces of footage from these zoom performances through, like COVID pandemic times, and lockdowns, it really made me think about how kind of like scanning the space around you was also what I was doing in my own domestic space, like becoming very intimate with something because I was spending a lot of time with it and you start seeing more details and taking a longer time to look closer and look for a bit longer and have a connection with things around you.This helps you build a history of your own and different reality and storytelling and I see that very much with world building with storytelling and attaching different meanings to to materials. This is something I very much enjoy observing about you working, whether that's physically in the studio or seeing how you kind of tell stories through images and sounds and kind of emotions really…. because I feel like there's so many like emotions and memories in these pieces of footage that you've been putting together.

Aaron
I'm glad that translated because it was a quite intense period, I would say and as with everyone, and so it was something I really found very difficult to work through. And also work through the different pressures to come up with something because oftentimes-I don't know- things are just things and you should maybe we should just leave them as they are. You know? Recordings are just recordings. So yeah I'm glad it resonated. Because I'm

still not sure whether…. a work in progress is kind of a label I put on the film, and I think it's interesting to unpack. Giulia, maybe you did mention this before about how the work, in this kind of like liminal space, how it can maybe be translated in different contexts. It's interesting to think about how the film can be screened, and in the kind of like a zoom context again and that adds a different layer to it. Or just say it's projected in a room, And how would that look? So I think I'm really interested in this space in which something it's constantly or could constantly pick things up, or accumulate things. And I think that's the kind of…I like the metal detector analogy Alex, because then you're, you're trying to—it's funny, because I use a lot of magnets in my work, and so did Li—but trying to find those moments of connection. But also, it was, how do you say… there's a sense of the metallic, I think is interesting, because it's… there is a coldness to it….kind of like... robotic almost, with the drone sound and everything. Again it's the kind of something that I'm trying to do, as we scan through the spaces in zoom and we try to find those moments of connection. But then there's something disorientating about this screen based interface. There is intimacy, but it's also quite alienating, I suppose. Those moments that I'm trying to pick up from, and accumulate and draw into, and I'm not sure whether the work is finished. It's hard, I don't know how you guys feel about when a work is finished, especially like a moving image work, because I often kind of edit and re-edit things. For instance how I use my materials, I always kind of use them and then like it becomes material again, then it becomes a work. So there's a sense of picking things up, and then, you know, constantly re-editing it. I guess maybe that relates to the kind of liveness that we spoke earlier about how to kind of generate liveness within materials, but also leftovers and archival materials and documentation—it's a different form of liveness, I suppose.

Giulia
Yeah, the film.. there's definitely an evolving element to it. One point it feels like an archive and in other contexts it's a documentation of something, it's a finished work, It's material to be used in an ever evolving sort of practice, I guess. I think it's exciting that you have all these diverse ways of engaging

with the materials and your surroundings and even embodying, in some ways, a different person, like with Li.

Yeah, your film “for” will be showing on the online screening room for the whole month of October. And there'll be a transcription—or there will be a transcription—available for this conversation. And we'll also link in all of the references. So if people want to learn more about Li and the LYC Museum, there'll be links available.

Thanks so much to have this chat with us, Aaron.

Aaron
Super, thank you for the invitation and the generosity again. It's been incredible to hear your comments and feedback and questions. Thank you.