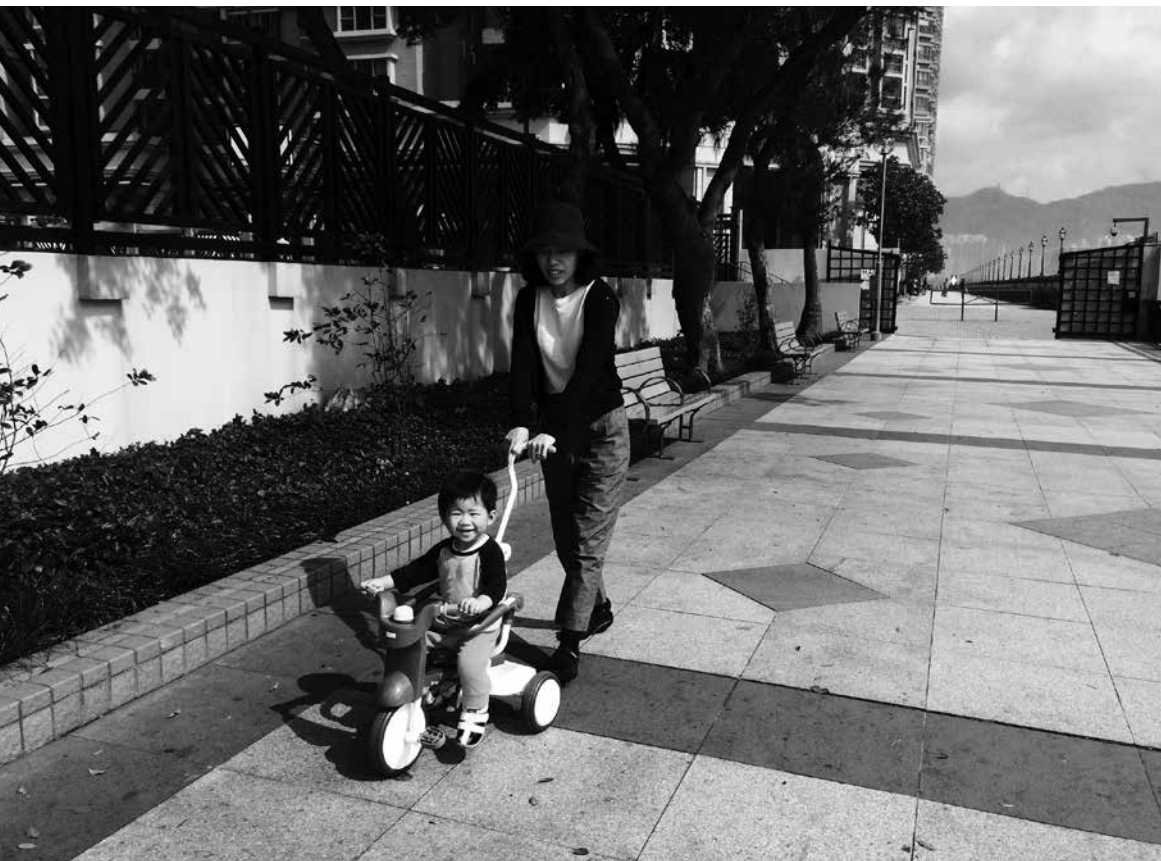


Phoebe Wong

A Conversation with Wong Wai Yin



Phoebe Wong: Entitled *Without Trying*, the exhibition at Spring Workshop, Hong Kong (August 20 to October 16, 2016), was your first solo show in five years. In-between these years, you married fellow artist Kwan Sheung Chi, and was occupied with child nurturing, which demanded much care and attention. With fifteen works on display, this show captures your recent thoughts and personal life experience. How have you been preparing for this exhibition?

Wong Wai Yin: It was two years ago that I resumed making art; it almost came to a stop in 2009 because of my family obligations. Returning from that professional hiatus, I started off with something that was easy to handle, both time-wise and technique-wise, so I did the posters, and named the series *Without trying*; the series that lends the title to the current show.

Phoebe Wong: I see your struggles expressed in these posters: “living in someone’s shadow,” “throw away the bad works,” “be ambitious,” “don’t compete with others,” and the like. You are questioning yourself . . .

Wong Wai Yin, *Being dead will be our only shared identity*, 2016, lightbox, 96.5 x 39 x 15.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

Wong Wai Yin: True, these posters address my state of mind during that particular time period. Usually, a poster serves as a tool for communication that is directed to others, but with these posters, they are things I said to myself.

Phoebe Wong: The residency at Spring Workshop then led up to the exhibition. How did you gradually pick up the momentum, and come up with this body of work?

Wong Wai Yin, *The ten seconds that determine whether A gets made into a work*, 2016, booklet. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.



Wong Wai Yin: Yes, the two-month, on-and-off residency at Spring Workshop has been instrumental in the realization of the show. As you may have noticed, the titles of these artworks are in a prosaic style. My work isn't usually born out of an idea, but of a sentence, a scene, or an emotion. Indeed, I have a habit of jotting down quotes or sentences from readings here and there, or thoughts that arise from my daydreaming. They then become a stimulus that I would subsequently develop into a work. The works reveal fragments of my readings, my

everyday life—child caring, learning French, or a musical instrument, and so forth. In the booklet titled *The ten seconds that determine whether A gets made into a work*, published on the occasion of the exhibition, I put together a selection of those quotes and noted some thoughts about my art making.

Phoebe Wong: The collection of texts—the quotes and your writings—reads at once like a confession and a manifesto. I particularly like one line in the booklet, when you are being asked why art exists: “Well, art is like a women who has nothing, but gives off the impression that she doesn't lack anything.”¹ Furthermore, you also have said, “I can't quite imagine how I can make work without talking about myself.”²

Wong Wai Yin, *Tribute to 'Inside Looking Out'—for the artist along my way*, 2008, video. Courtesy of the artist.



On this note, you seem to have a propensity to favour working with male artists. In an older work of yours, the video *Tribute to 'Inside Looking Out'—for the artist along my way* (2008), features all your male artist friends. And in the video piece *Everyone's sick*, (2016) the three interviewees are male artists or

practitioners in the art field. At the same time, you are concerned about the under-privileged conditions or predicaments that come with being a female artist. Do you consider that a contradiction?



Wong Wai Yin: Even Kwan Sheung Chi wondered about that and once commented to me, “I’ve never seen you working with any female (artist).” [Laughs.] I do cherish friendship with females; unfortunately it is something I seldom get. I do not have a lot of female friends even though I was educated in a girls’ school. In any case, in the video piece *Everyone’s sick*, I invited those three male friends because we have known each other very well, and all along I have found them a bit crazy. For this type of work—using spiritual response therapy (SRT)—you have to be with your close friends. And because of that, they are very honest in the conversations.

Phoebe Wong: The conversations struck me as coming from people in a mid-life crisis. As these are fairly young individuals, thirty-somethings, I even thought they might be having a premature mid-life crisis. [Laughs.]

Top: Wong Wai Yin, *Everyone’s sick*, 2016, 3-channel video, 17 mins., 24 secs., 11 mins., 32 secs., 19 mins, installation view of *Without Trying*, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong. Photo: Michael C. W. Chiu. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

Bottom: Wong Wai Yin, *Everyone’s sick* (detail), 2016, video. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

Wong Wai Yin: We never grow up, even though our youth passes away.
[Laughs.]

Phoebe Wong: How did you apply the technique that you learned with SRT into those interviews? What was the process?

Wong Wai Yin: I have a crystal pendulum for the SRT, complete with a set of over thirty charts, and each chart contains a specific theme. According to the SRT, all elements in the universe work as a whole, and all people's consciousness are inter-connected. I conducted the interviews by using SRT to address their problems, and thus in turn addressing my own problems.

Phoebe Wong: I notice that some common keywords are shared in the conversations, such as fear, suppression, ambition, violence, self-handicapping, and the like.

Wong Wai Yin: Yes, these words are on the chart, and pointed to by the pendulum. I didn't invite these friends just because they are eccentric, it's also because they don't believe in metaphysics, so I was trying to provoke them too. They all made jokes about me while doing the SRT.

Wong Wai Yin, *Clearing ten thorns*, 2016, video, 1 min., 33 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

Phoebe Wong: In the short video *Clearing ten thorns*, (2016) you figuratively eliminated the thorns that were bothering you by stomping and smashing foods that you have chosen to represent each of them. They are: cynicism, hierarchy, racism, bandwagon effect, patriotism, patriarchy, economic benefit, authority, one party system, and positive psychology. There seems to be a randomness between the thorns and the foods you have used to represent them—for instance, an apple for cynicism, or, a piece of tofu for the one party system. And I'm very curious about your thoughts pertaining to be against "positive psychology." What's your experience with it? Is it different from the SRT that you are practicing?



Wong Wai Yin: Well, I'd say positive psychology tends to over-simplify things; it's like brain washing. And very often, positive psychology promotes meaningful and fulfilled lives that go after fame, materialism, and success. I find that problematic.

Phoebe Wong: Although I'm generally not a fan of autobiographical works, I enjoy the candid expression of emotions and the wrongdoing-type of humour in a number of your works, as seen in the cartoonish wooden flash-of-lightening, the singing of a beloved French song, the gawky platform shoes that make you one centimeter higher than your husband, or the training of a dog—a ceramic dog. Always being ready to poke fun



at yourself is one of the things that makes you Wong Wai Yin. Curator Anthony Yung once called you a satirist with unmitigated skepticism.



Having said that, I find the show *Without Trying* as piecemeal. Perhaps that has something to do with the lack of visual coherence and artistic progression that would exemplify an artist of your calibre

and experience, if I may be allowed to say it. It is much to do with the fact that you have kept your execution simple, avoiding ostentation of any kind. Besides, your works tend to be microscopic in worldview, which is indeed commonplace among Hong Kong artists.



Wong Wai Yin: Well, I'm not the type of artist who is desperate to carve out an artistic career through developing a signature style. Perhaps "piecemeal" is the right word—I use any material, medium, or format for my art making. So, sometimes it is difficult to present myself or talk about my works by employing umbrella terms to describe them.

Phoebe Wong: Anthony Yung's summing up of your practice back in 2009 is still applicable to your current works, "The works of Wong Wai Yin might appear to be insipid and bland—but why is this the case? As if a collection of dull diary entries, stale and humdrum, she nonetheless invites you to become a reader of it, and is unafraid to be seen as an unimaginative artist. She seems to have deserted her works, relinquished the pursuit of novelty and uniqueness, and is removed from an arrogant form of creation. By treating the ordinary work with unsurprising indifference, an unperturbed balance and an air of nonchalance has been created between the audience and the work itself."³

Top: Wong Wai Yin, *A centimeter taller than you*, 2016, video, 1 min., 44 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

Left: Wong Wai Yin, *The dog that won't be trained*, 2016, video, 29 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

Wong Wai Yin, *Opening all the world's doors*, 2016, keys, key box, key ring, installation view of *Without Trying*, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong. Photo: Michael C. W. Chiu. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

In fact, in respect to a lot of your previous works, I'd easily put them under one label, namely, institutional critique; and apparently your ideas come before the medium or form.

Wong Wai Yin: Yes, I did move away from making works that ask the ontological questions of art, or, as you have put them under the label of institutional critique.

In the past few years, I have gone through a period of immense self-doubt: I worried if my art was any good at all to others. As in the process of water crystallization, saying good or bad things about it will result in ugly or beautiful formations. By the same token, I once worried that my works carried my negative energies. With the practice of meditation and SRT, I'd say I have reached a resolution—I have no more doubts about art like I used to. Now, I have more faith in art, and art is something I'd really love to do.



Wong Wai Yin, *Wish you were eternal*, 2016, installation view of *Without Trying*. Photo: Michael C. Chiu. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

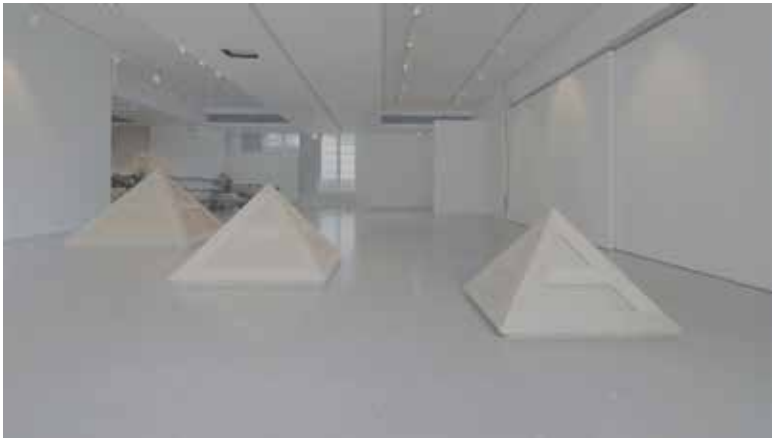
Phoebe Wong: The act of burying past works appears to mark this shift, as shown in the installation *Wish you were eternal*, (2016) and the video *Works that know what the artist doesn't* (2016). The video, featuring the last words from the artworks, tickles my imagination by having a dialogue with the inanimate objects through a psychic medium. It reminds me of Christian Jankowski's piece at the Taipei Biennial (TPB) in 2010, in which he presented a work that is about him consulting a medium for his art career. (Indeed, you were also being featured in the same iteration of TPB).

How did you come to know Percy Mak, a local animal communicator with the gift of having extra-sensory perception?

Wong Wai Yin: I had heard of him before. Four years ago, deeply saddened by the sudden death of my cat, I approached him to inquire about my cat. I wanted to know why he died all of a sudden. Perhaps this might not make



Wong Wai Yin, *Works that know what the artist doesn't*.
2016, video, 6 mins., 1 sec.
Courtesy of the artist.



a lot of sense to other people, but I simply couldn't accept the fact that a cat would die. I was hopelessly miserable. Percy told me that my cat has had to leave this world because he is indeed a guru, and now has his mission in the otherworld in order to help out mistreated animals with their reincarnations.

Phoebe Wong: That sounds comforting, no? Do you differentiate the consciousness between an animal and an object?

Wong Wai Yin: As far as animism is concerned, in Percy's view, there is no difference between animals and objects. As a psychic medium, Percy believes in uniformity; as one considers oneself an integral part of the universe, it is also possible for anyone to tap into the pool of common consciousness.

Phoebe Wong: I wonder how you feel when you hear what your artworks have said to you. For instance, "We love it when we see a smile, even if it is a silly grin. We want her to smile at us, or grin at us. Weeping. Gentle sobs nearby. We ought to know. We know her thoughts, and we sense what she thinks. We would like her to sit amongst us, all smiles, talking to us. We would like her to tell us stories of how we were born, how she perceives us, as individuals, as groups, as clusters and as a whole. . . . we know it all, but we are never tired of listening."

Wong Wai Yin: Frankly, the awkward sentimentality gives me goose bumps. I never thought that my works would speak in such an old-school way. [Laughs.]

Wong Wai Yin, *Talking Archive*, 2016, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong. Photo: Kitmin Lee. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

Phoebe Wong: This leads to the other project you have also recently finished at the Asia Art Archive (AAA), being part of the *15 Invitations* project that celebrates the AAA's 15th anniversary in 2016.



Wong Wai Yin: It is indeed my second time to work on an AAA art project. To start off, I went through some of the previous *15 Invitations* projects and noticed that people mainly used the AAA's collections for their writing or for curating an exhibition. In other words, the materials were rarely the "protagonist"; they often played an auxiliary role, so to speak. I then took a humorous approach and decided to turn the materials into the main characters for my project, and, more importantly, I let them speak. It was rather instinctive that I had Percy again to work on another project as such. In addition, I also believed that it would be productive to involve the AAA staff members; so I got them to contribute to the project by sending in questions directed to the AAA collections.

Phoebe Wong: The end result is a seven-minute video with the title *Talking Archive*. Now, the questions are rather general, and directed towards the organization; that is, AAA. For instance, "As an art book, what's your mission?," "Are you happy with AAA?," "Who would you like to come



Wong Wai Yin, *Talking Archive*, 2016, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong. Photo: Kitmin Lee. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.



Wong Wai Yin, *Talking Archive*, 2016, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong. Photo: Kitmin Lee. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

visit you?," "Do you have any advice to the researchers?," and the like. I'm wondering why you do not address the question to a specific document, or book. It would perhaps turn out to be quirky, uneven, but one could relate to it in a more specific manner, no?

Wong Wai Yin: I received over one hundred questions; a lot of the content overlaps, though at the same time they are rather wide-ranging. In the end, I made the decision to select a barrage of questions related to AAA as an institution.

Percy came on board with the project without much prior knowledge of AAA. We booked a room at AAA's office where he worked alone with the selected questions given to him. When he reappeared a few hours later, he had all the answers (in Chinese). We then did the voice recording. The final work is a video with a time-lapsed, single-take of the AAA library from day to night—one sees the activities at the library in fast motion—that is accompanied by Percy's narration. It was great fun turning Percy's voice into that of an alien who happened to have just come down from a UFO. [Laughs.]

Phoebe Wong: The answers are coherent, and Percy's language is lyrical. Look at this: "Men and women of different ages, hair in black, red, grey,

gold, and white. They pull wheelbarrows. Pile, Pile, pile. Stack, stack, stack. They stack books into sculptures of varying size. Someone takes a book out of a pile. Sitting among the sculptures on a chair made of the same material, the person pulls out a notebook and pen and starts jotting down lines from the book. Some books are flowering; others bear fruit. Some people pile up brick; others move around in the book-built structure.”

And, I have to say, it is super hilarious when Canto-pop lyrics were sung (by Percy) out of the blue: “I wait in solitude until late night. The night is growing older and darker.” (等 / 寂寞到夜深 / 夜已漸荒涼 / 夜已漸昏暗) [Laughs.]

Do you analyze what Percy came up with?

Wong Wai Yin: No, I usually don’t do that. I didn’t give him any information in advance, neither did I add any afterward. I did minor edits to the recorded sound track for the sake of fluidity.

Phoebe Wong: The language in the piece is metaphorical in nature. I am curious about how he captures the fugitive thoughts with words?

Wong Wai Yin, *Talking Archive*, 2016, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong. Photo: Kitmin Lee. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

Wong Wai Yin: I have to tell you that, interestingly enough, that isn’t his normal way of speaking. As an animal communicator, Percy speaks to all kinds of animals and all animals speak in different ways. For example, my deceased cat speaks with Chinese idioms, a refined language that suggests wisdom; whereas my friend’s poor cat that suffered from losing hair because of being subjected to blasting music, speaks with more coarse language. [Laughs.] According to Percy, for the AAA project, it was a total visual experience: a large number of vivid visual images emerged in his mind during the “talking session” when he was alone.



Phoebe Wong: The language and subject matter (content) appeared so fittingly coherent.

Wong Wai Yin: That is pretty much by mere chance.

Phoebe Wong: For the monologues in these two videos, with the short prose and keywords being juxtaposed against each other, they struck me as stream of consciousness. From this perspective, as far as spiritual practice is concerned, and on top of your pursuit of self-transcendence, this also may suggest an exploration of a working method to bring forward new aesthetics. I see this approach more or less a methodological experiment too. How will you continue to explore this method in your future work?



Wong Wai Yin: I haven't given much thought to the methodological matter. I don't systematically think about how to make art. Perhaps I would say my practice defies easy categorization, I don't confine myself to any neat category of mediums or styles. Beside, now that I am a believer of mediumship and spiritualism, I see that as a state of mind, it has more effect on my personal life than on my art making. At one time I didn't understand how the world functions, now I have a better comprehension. Given that I now have a different worldview, my aesthetics will naturally be different as well, which may be indirectly reflected in my practice, so to speak.

Kwan Sheung Chi and Wong Wai Yin, *And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music*, 2015, video installation. Courtesy of the artist.

Phoebe Wong: This reminds me of a 2015 video piece you did in collaboration with Kwan Sheung Chi, and what you said in the title: *And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music*. And, here, empathy counts.

Wong Wai Yin: All in all, I quite like the *Without Trying* show as I am able to talk about my worries, my fears, my motherhood, and other feelings through the works. It's about personal issues that are subsequently resolved. And considering the autobiographical dimension you mentioned, I don't think my work is only meaningful to myself, as what I have experienced is common to others too, thus people can relate. Many of my previous works speak to people in the art field, whereas the present body of works speaks to non-art people. In this light, this exhibition reaches out to more people.

Notes

1. *The ten seconds that determine whether A gets made into a work* (Hong Kong: Spring Workshop, 2016), 57.
2. *Ibid.*, 53.
3. Anthony Yung, "Satirist: Wong Wai Yin," in *L'Ecume des choses: L'art de Wong Wai Yin* (Guangzhou: Observation Society, 2009), 1.