11 Apr 2024 / by Tiffany Luk

From Hong Kong to Venice: A Conversation between Olivia Chow and Trevor Yeung

8 mins
Visual Art / Visual Culture / M+ Exhibitions / Article

A meticulously crafted ecosystem in an aquarium. A suspended *pachira aquatica,* otherwise known as a money tree. A small cluster of illuminated plastic mushrooms. If you have ever explored Hong Kong art spaces, you are likely to have encountered the botanical or aquatic installations of Trevor Yeung. His distinctive practice centres on ecology and care, often using these concepts to explore the relationships between the past and the present, flora and fauna, and their symbiotic relationship with humanity.

When M+ and the Hong Kong Arts Development Council announced that Yeung would represent Hong Kong at the collateral event of the 60th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, *Trevor Yeung: Courtyard of Attachments, Hong Kong in Venice* and that Olivia Chow, Assistant Curator, Visual Art, M+ would curate, it felt like Chow was a serendipitous choice for exploring Yeung's oeuvre. When you meet them together, it is evident from their body language that a genuine friendship underlies their professional dynamics.

I first met Chow during the installation of *Shirley Tse: Stakes and Holders*, at the M+ Pavilion in Hong Kong in 2020, the museum's temporary exhibition space prior to the completion of the Herzog and de Meuron building. This was the response presentation of the exhibition *Shirley Tse: Stakeholders, Hong Kong in Venice*, held at the 58th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia in 2019. It therefore felt opportune to meet with Chow and Yeung to explore their interpersonal and professional relationship as they prepared their Venice project. I met with them at Yeung's Fotan studio with a set of questions about labour. The artist and curator were deliberately not sent the questions beforehand to elicit a more informal conversation.

Illustration by Kaitlin Chan

What is it like working with me?

Olivia Chow: The question is: ‘What is it like working with me?’ It has been good working with you. Better than I imagined.

Trevor Yeung: Speak carefully. [Laugh]

OC: At first, when everyone found out that we were doing this show together, they were like: ‘Oh, it should be fine. You guys are such good friends.’ I thought, ‘Huh? But we have never worked together before.’ I didn’t know how it would turn out. But now that we have worked closely together for so many months, it’s been very smooth, and we are very efficient.

TY: And we know what to expect, and what we need to do. Maybe the reason is we’ve known each other for a long time and understand each other’s temperament very well. We know what each other’s concerns will be and can resolve issues quickly before we say anything. I also learned our boundaries well. As friends, I felt like you would already know what the other person’s temperament is like before working together. Thus, you will understand when we work together, there will be some points of conflict, but how do you avoid this? How do you make it work without turning it into an awkward or difficult situation.

OC: Yes, and how to honestly talk about what we will have to do. I know what is important to him or what he doesn’t want to do but must do, and how to communicate that with him so it’s easier to accept. We understand that we have to do these things, but how do we productively complete something? I think we both are very considerate of each other’s feelings. At work, you will not always only do your favourite things, but everyone understands that it is the need of the job.

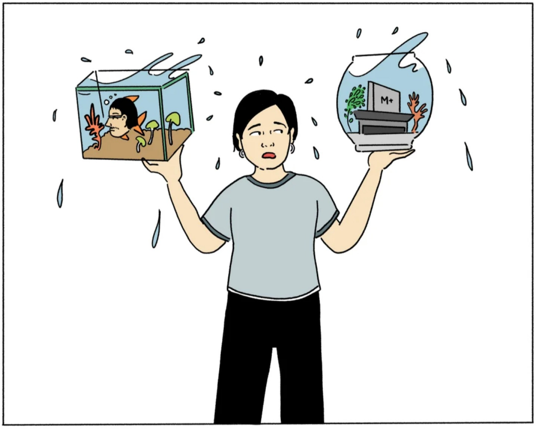


Illustration by Kaitlin Chan

What do you think is the hardest part of my job?

TY: I think the most difficult thing for you is that as an exhibition curator, when you work at M+—which is ultimately a large art institution…and as an artist, our perspectives can be so different. Artists may only focus on making the artwork good without being fully aware and considering the factors of the overall environment. I know that you have to balance this throughout the whole process. And this is not just [specific to] you but it's something all curators must do. And I'm thinking not just a curator, but as you, Olivia.

I think you manage it better than others. Because everything has its difficulties, and everything is difficult. It's just about how we balance everything.

OC: The hardest part [of your job] as an artist might be how quickly you can conceptualise and execute an idea, but for you, this doesn't seem to be really difficult. Every time M+ does this [Venice Biennale Hong Kong] project, artists have a really short time to think about the concepts, the deliveries, and then to revise and revise to meet different deadlines.

This is not something every artist can cooperate with. Not everyone can say, 'I know immediately what I want to do or how to achieve that institutional [need] and creative balance.' So, I think this should be very difficult. It's difficult for you, but you manage to do it very well.

TY: Because as we mentioned before, we want to make things happen, so even if it's difficult, we find a way to make it work.

OC: What's difficult is not necessarily the most difficult.

TY: Yes, and we find a way to make it work.

OC: And when we try to make it work, it's not about compromising. It's about looking at it from different perspectives and finding the best solution that also aligns with Trevor's ideas for the show. That's always the goal. And then how do we get there in different ways?

TY: Actually, one thing we both find the most difficult is… are the things that we can't control.

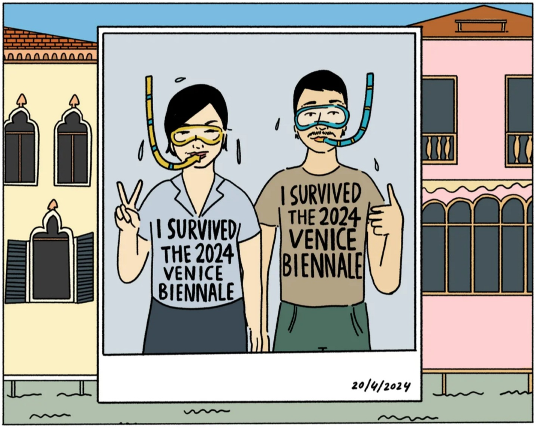

I SURVIVED THE 2024 VENICE BIENNALE
I SURVIVED THE 2024 VENICE BIENNALE
20/4/2024

Illustration by Kaitlin Chan

What do you hope to get out of Venice Biennale?

TY: What do you hope to get out of Venice Biennale?

OC: To get out…

TY: To survive and stay alive.

OC: It's coming so fast actually.

TY: So fast, it's crazy.

OC: It's a month away, and then we'll go, and then fast-forward to the end of April.

TY: I personally feel that I haven't reached that point yet. I've only reached a certain point [where I'm still thinking about] how I can get it done. I still can't think of what outcomes I'll have.

OC: We set up and took photos of the works for the exhibition catalogue in the past few weeks, so we could already see some of the works in person. Discussing the works, writing about them, presenting them so many times, and having discussions about them for so long—it had all been based on our imagination and looking at the artist's [past] works to imagine what the show will be like. In the past few weeks, there was a real sense of what the show would be like, and it was very exciting. When the show opens in April—when the exhibition is completely set up—everything will not just be stuffed at the back [of his studio] messily, but [when] it's really completely done—it's hard to imagine the excitement—the fulfillment will be high.

TY: You can't make me smile because it's not done yet. It's my personality.

OC: I have great confidence in you! It's going to be fine.

Illustration by Kaitlin Chan

Do plants thrive in my care?

OC: I know what the answer is.

TY: Tell me.

OC: I'm a plant killer.

TY: Actually, sometimes, I doubt myself.

OC: Doubt what?

TY: Doubt myself [whether plants thrive in my care], and you're a plant killer.

OC: Well, you can't generalise the whole world based on that [doubt].

TY: The thing is, sometimes when you care too much, you're not necessarily good at it.

OC: Sure, but at least you have some success rate.

TY: Yes, but I think it's a good thing to keep doubting yourself as a caretaker, because then you'll know what you can improve on to give them a better life.

OC: Even though they would not thrive in my care, I know who can take care of these plants. I know my limitations, but I know what other's strengths are.

TY: That's a very good answer.

Illustration by Kaitlin Chan

Describe my practice in three words.

TY: The first word is ‘balance’, the second one is ‘communication’, the third word is a bit long: ‘concern without really showing concern’. Meaning that you actually care but you don’t show that [you care] in the forefront. Instead, you would take a step back to look at it. Because to some extent, when you want to give support to an artist, or when you look at something, or when you have concerns about certain issues, you don’t immediately speak it out. These things need to be gradually revealed.

OC: You did it.

OC: Using three words to describe your practice, the first one is ‘position’: you do a lot of work, placing everything and everyone. You know the positions of everything. It’s actually very important for your artworks. The second word is ‘meticulous’: everything is very specific and has a specific meaning. Then, the third word is ‘poetic’. Besides being very poetic, it also has a tinge of cringe, but I will stick with poetic.

TY: Thank you.

[Both laughs]

This article is extracted from a conversation between Olivia Chow, Assistant Curator, Visual Art, M+ and Trevor Yeung, moderated by Tiffany Luk, Editor, Digital Content, M+. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Trevor Yeung (b. 1988, Guangdong) was raised, lives, and works in Hong Kong. His art excavates the inner logic of human relations. Fascinated by botanic ecology and horticulture, Yeung features carefully staged objects, photographs, animals, and plants in his mixed-media works as aesthetic pretexts to address notions of artificial nature. He often projects emotional and intellectual scenarios onto living substitutes in his work, translating his own social experiences into elaborate fables through which he continues to explore failure and imperfection. Yeung ultimately questions how closed systems contain and create emotional and behaviourial conditions.

Olivia Chow is a curator and artist living in Hong Kong. As Assistant Curator, Visual Art, at M+, she works with artists to create exhibitions, publications, and public programmes, including *Nalini Malani: In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012/2022), *Nalini Malani: Vision in Motion* (2021), *Shirley Tse: Stakes and Holders* (2020), and *Shirley Tse: Stakeholders, Hong Kong in Venice* (2019), Hong Kong’s Collateral Event in the 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.

Tiffany Luk

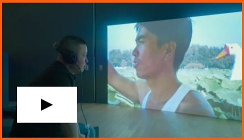
Tiffany Luk is Editor, Digital Content, at M+.

More Stories

更多故事

Meet the Shortlisted Artists of Sigg Prize 2023

Meet the shortlisted artists of Sigg Prize 2023 and learn about their unique visions for addressing urgent contemporary issues through their artwork



Wang Tuo: Time Refracted

Wang Tuo's films blend interviews, reality shows, and theatre, exposing society's absurdities and intertwining histories

9 mins: Moving Image / Video

For a brighter future

Visual Aftershocks: The Works of Trevor Yeung, Wang Tuo, and Miao Ying in the Sigg Prize 2023 Exhibition

Ariadne Long examines the works by Trevor Yeung, Wang Tuo, and Miao Ying in the Sigg Prize 2023 exhibition to see how they have captured these visual…

6 mins: Visual Art / Moving Image / Digital / M+ Exhibitions / Article

Stay in the know!

緊貼最新消息！

- ✓ Be up to date on what's happening at M+ and the wider West Kowloon Cultural District
- ✓ Discover new videos and articles from the M+ Magazine
- ✓ Choose what content you'd like to receive
- ✓ Opt out at any time

Subscribe

M+ Magazine Archive M+雜誌檔案 →

Collection Online M+藏品 →