

CONVERSATIONS

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Outside In – A Conversation with Ming Wong

written by **Mathis Neuhaus**

A conversation on becoming an artist, defining the topics and creating a narrative.

Mathis Neuhaus: From what point in life did you consider yourself an artist or was there an artwork you did where you thought: this is it. This is what I want to do?

Ming Wong: How far back would you want to go?

Mathis Neuhaus: That really depends.

Ming Wong: I have a vague recollection that when I was a child I had these images in my head of me playing different roles. I do not know where it came from, that was not clear when it happened to me, because I was very little, like five or six years old. But I do remember having flashes of me playing different roles, trying to be a girl, mix some of my relatives in a role or something and then somebody said: "Oh, you know. You will be known for doing this." I did not know what that meant, if I was going to be an actor, a clown or just a troublemaker. I just thought about it now and I guess this also comes from the week that we spent together here in Hong Kong and the topics that we dealt with: identity, playing roles etc. That you have these flashes, like uploading your mind. And I carry this memory with me and it popped in my head just now when we talked about this.

Mathis Neuhaus: Pretty interesting that you found one of your work's main topics pretty early in life.

Ming Wong: I can answer the question from different stages of my life, but, looking back, this was a strange encounter that stuck with me. It was significant.

Mathis Neuhaus: This leads to a thing we talked about a couple of days ago. You referred to the term of codeswitching and said that you are doing it all the time. Not only in your work, but also in your everyday life. Where do you see the creative potential in this?

Ming Wong: I think I was not realizing it when it was happening the first times, as it is one of these things that you only notice in retrospect. Part of this necessity or skill comes from growing up in Singapore, which is a multi-racial and multi-lingual society where you do not have any dominating culture, it is a mixture of different things. And part of my investigations into my own roots and identity led to this so-called practice of codeswitching. There was a point where I realized that some people can fall back on some kind of reference to their national identity or cultural heritage, what I cannot. Being from Singapore during a certain era, you could not fall back on anything. And I decided that this is going to be an advantage, not a disadvantage. From that moment, I knew this was a way to be an artist and it was a way to use and make most of this position. As a tool, as a weapon, which maybe not many people would have. Codeswitching does not only refer to cultural identity, but also to other things. I was very conscious about that during my time in London. The UK is a very hierarchical society; they have a strong class system and very distinct social behavior connected to your place in society. I was working there and I had to fit in on many different levels. When I was working, say, for an institution I needed to be able to communicate with a wide range of audiences. Growing up in Singapore, which was a British colony and being of Chinese descent and having this multi-cultural upbringing and references enables me to codeswitch in everyday life and it consequently became part of my artistic practice.

Mathis Neuhaus: Like a chameleon. I am asking this, because I find it interesting to think about – in Germany for example, you definitely have these artists that you would consider to be making “German art” or you have Ai Weiwei, for example, who makes art that is completely connected, maybe not so much anymore, but for a long time, to his situation as a Chinese dissident – and I feel that you mostly reflect about your own upbringing and heritage that is not as set. And the codeswitching, that plays into it, is very distinctive and very broad at the same time.

Ming Wong: A lot of my thinking on and about things is not static. If I show a work

of mine another time, in a different country, in a different context or in a different architecture it changes. I am very aware of multiple readings of a work. Even if I don't know exactly what the reading could be, I am sensitive to that. I can direct it in a specific way. Whereas, you mentioned Ai Weiwei, really embodied the dissident Chinese artist and now that he is accepted and living in Germany, is, so called, released from this artistic prison. It is a role that has a certain demand on him from the audience. I find this dangerous, I prefer to be able to undermine and to keep shifting the reading of who I am and what I do. But maybe that is also just a fantasy.

Mathis Neuhaus: In your works, I imagine failure is a possibility. Did you ever fail with what you wanted to say artistically?

Ming Wong: That is an interesting question, if I failed.

Mathis Neuhaus: Failed is also a really strong word, maybe: if you were not able to translate what you wanted to say into an artwork?

Ming Wong: I imagine to be one of those artists who don't make it really concrete what the outcome or the so-called meaning would be. I think it is more about asking questions and reflecting, puzzling things together and not offering solutions. The abstract and the slipperiness that defines my work is also part of life. You cannot necessarily put your finger on it. For me, this is exactly what makes life interesting and also what makes art "art". That it is defined by ambiguity, can be read differently, change and shift. So, this is something I aim for and maybe, if I think of a failure, it is that I try to do something too precise. If it is too concrete and too literal. And this comes only more recently, this realization. Starting out as an artist, you often show your work in an immediate and local context, and once you start to show your work in other places you can either just show how it is or, that is what I am doing, reconsider, how it could be read, where it could go, if there is something extra I could add and therefore expand the reach and resonance. I think, this is something that I try and aim for as well. That it can mean different things to different people.

Mathis Neuhaus: It is part of the artistic practice to deal with artworks getting their own life after they are done. They can be read differently, react to different surroundings that have different backgrounds and so on. And you can either embrace and learn to live with that or, well, I don't know what else. The work lives on.

Ming Wong: For example, I used to show my work mostly in a European context, because I have been living in London and then in Berlin. And then I started showing a lot in Asia and Mainland China, six or seven years ago, and the references they have differ to those that I am familiar with. I am ethnically Chinese, but now I see the older audiences in China that grew up in a Communist system, they did not grow up with the same cultural references that I did. Their ideas of what constitutes kitsch, satire or parody are very different from what I was used to. I am constantly learning and evolving when I share my works with such audiences and I like that. I am playing the role of an artist and that shifts, too. I have been involved in exhibitions that deal with Southeast Asia and suddenly that becomes a label and I am a “Southeast Asian artist.” And I am part of exhibitions about queer identity or shows about moving image, about artists working in cinema. And this keeps changing and I think that is healthy. But it is also something one has to be aware of.

Mathis Neuhaus: You said you moved to Berlin from London, because you needed more space or because of the lack of space in London. Did this change of cities affect your work? Or differently put: would you make different art if you would still be living in London or in a different city?

Ming Wong: Yes, I think so. This is clear in retrospect. Because there is a lot of historical baggage, being an artist of Chinese descent, from Singapore, in Great Britain. There are a lot of historical connotations. There is a post-colonial cloud hanging over this, for example. It is very much entrenched in the British society. How people frame you. In Germany, that is a different story. There is less of a post-colonial baggage, with respect to my identity. It was in a way a cleaner slate to work with. And also, the way Berlin or German society is structured, there is a lot more outwardlookingness, in my opinion.

Mathis Neuhaus: In Berlin, at least.

Ming Wong: Okay, let's say in Berlin. Because it has its own history of having people who don't fit in coming to Berlin. And being a haven for alternative philosophies. I think that helped me to give me more mental space as well as physical space.

Mathis Neuhaus: How do you approach new projects? Do you work with a concrete question first or a vague idea? Or is it different every time?

Ming Wong: My work is research based, but besides that there are two main

motivations. The first one would be my interest in the history of cinema. I do like to look at how moving image and how cinema developed in a certain location, country or state, at a time when national cinema was still relevant. When cinema still was used to communicate with a certain group of people who speak a certain language and have certain cultural references. And this is tied to identity formation, in terms of state for example. Secondly, it has to do a lot with my personal journeys and what I see during these travels. That's what I tend to do. And then one question leads to another question, it branches out, new connections are found and the projects grow. Now, I am also taking my time to develop projects by setting my own deadlines, whereas before, when working from deadline to deadline to commissions it was a bit more difficult. The spectrum and range of ideas and questions is getting wider. Therefore, they take a bit longer to come to a point where I think it's finished.

Mathis Neuhaus: I guess that is also coming from being or becoming more established as an artist. That you have the luxury to take more time for projects, because you are not as pressed to chase commissions.

Ming Wong: It has also to do with getting older. I started to do some teaching, for example, and my own role expanded a bit. Not only a practicing artist anymore, but also a teacher. And, by getting older, you start to care less about what other people demand of you. It helps to focus and to believe that things will take their own time.

Mathis Neuhaus: As you know, our program is called "Transcultural Collaboration" and I was wondering, how you approach collaborations. Do you like collaborating? What is your stance on this artistic practice?

Ming Wong: I like to work collaboratively. A lot of my work involves team practice. Working in cinema demands this by default. Artistically, in fact I've been doing more collaborations consciously in recent years. That I would seek out other artists that I respect and who I get along really well with and want to create something with on an artistic equal level. Primarily, artists who have a similar practice to mine: performing, thinking about identities, working with moving image. Maybe this is a way for me to get away or out of repeating myself, of being entrenched in a certain way of artmaking. It is a refreshing way to force yourself to surrender your ego and see where things can go. It is a rich way of working. I was thinking a lot about it this week, when I was working with this diverse group of artists from Europe and Asia and I thought about the agents involved. You know, it is a project initiated by Zurich, in itself a diverse society, and choosing to work in Hong Kong, which has a

layered history and also in Singapore that also has this: I don't think that is a coincidence, these are facts that came together and it makes sense. Building bridges.

Ming Wong

Ming Wong works with cinema and popular culture to consider how culture and gender are constructed, reproduced and circulated. Through imperfect translations and reenactments, Wong uncovers the slippages that haunt ideas of 'authenticity' and 'originality'. Wong's video installations often remake classic films, with the artist playing all of the characters, regardless of gender or ethnicity. Recent projects have become more interdisciplinary, incorporating performance and installation to flesh out his exploration of cultural artefacts from around the world.

Ming Wong lives and works in Berlin.

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