

WONG KIT YI



Double Time

BY CHLOE CHU

Portrait of WONG KIT YI, from her exhibition "North Pole Futures" at K11, New York, 2015. Courtesy the artist.

Installation view of WONG KIT YI's DNA sampling station at "Magic Wands, Batons and DNA Splicers," Art Space, Art Basel, Hong Kong, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Art Space, Hong Kong.

New York-based conceptual artist Wong Kit Yi shares a website, apartment and body with her business manager Ali Wong. "Kit Yi" was born in Hong Kong in 1982 and named as such by her parents following the advice of a feng shui master. "Ali" came about when a British expatriate teacher, who had trouble remembering Chinese names, assigned the moniker to her in class. Kit Yi can be identified as the more creative one of the two; her only real interest in life is making art. Ali, on the other hand, is more grounded and organized. The two of them unanimously insist that they have always coexisted with each other.

While this might sound like a case of dissociative personality disorder to some, to Kit Yi and Ali it is more a situation of hyper-efficiency that allows the two personalities to grow individually as well as work collaboratively. The pair assist each other in dissecting the various spatiotemporal conditions that shape our perceptions, and in weaving together the threads of wide-ranging cultural phenomena to propose new ways of seeing the world. Kit Yi said, "I like things to be two-in-one, like shampoo-conditioner"—explaining her preference for simultaneous, multifaceted explorations. This drives her multimedia practice, which bridges topics from cryogenics and reverse-aging to feng shui. Meanwhile, Ali—who partly attributes her management skills to Takashi Murakami, for whom she worked as a studio assistant in 2012; and her mother, an entrepreneur—is concerned with innovative, meaningful ways to present exhibitions and engage with collectors, launching schemes such as 99-year leases for Kit Yi's artworks.

Kit Yi studied traditional ink painting at the Chinese University of Hong Kong from 2002 to 2006, where she honed her strong observational skills. She learned that in order to capture the essence of a subject—the smell of a flower, the breeze on a tree branch—in a Chinese painting, one must rely on not just seeing, but all of the senses. This close analysis of sensorial experience and manipulation of viewers' perceptions evolved into abstract painting, then three-dimensional works and performances. In 2009, for example, she strolled down Hong Kong's streets in a *cheongsam* (traditional Chinese dress) fashioned from disposable medical masks—a ubiquitous accessory that year due to the outbreak of swine flu in the city. Conceived of as a performance-sculpture, *I Wear Facemasks* analyzes the navigation of bodies in public areas,

particularly in the context of the mass hysteria and discomfort surrounding contagions and personal space. The *cheongsam* itself was also a comment on the encroachment of modernity on tradition, and how, growing up in Hong Kong, the artist felt that her identity was molded by her position between cultures.

When Kit Yi was admitted into Yale's sculpture program for her Master's degree in 2010, she continued to investigate the idea of boundaries, which prompted questions of who we let into our personal and social spaces—whether physically, culturally or psychologically—and why. The performance *Ming-yan Wei* (2011), which saw five Chinese female students at Yale interchangeably playing the fictional role of a missing student for one day, was a direct response to these inquiries. By co-occupying this imagined psychic territory, Kit Yi and her collaborators were able to highlight the overlaps in their ways of seeing, and how others view them. (And though Kit Yi might not willingly acknowledge this, perhaps the work was also informed by her symbiotic relationship with Ali.)

Around the same time, Ali was similarly exploring spatial intervention in her curatorial practice. In 2013, she was invited by Prem Krishnamurthy to curate a show at New York's P! Gallery, for which she enlisted the help of a feng shui master. Wanting to push the possibilities of curating beyond models based on cultural brokerage and, ultimately, personal taste, Ali handed over all her decisions to Master Ye, who called the shots on which artists to include and where to position the works in the gallery based on the participants' birthdays. Involving Master Ye allowed Ali to take a back seat to observe the patterns of power that shape consumerist culture. This preference for distance, which she shares with Kit Yi, coupled with a job opportunity at Asia Art Archive in New York, explained their decision to stay in the United States following graduation from Yale. Ali said: "I needed New York to give me new perspective on my native culture. By having some distance from Hong Kong, I got to see it more clearly."

This sharing of agency—like "setting up a game of ping-pong, where the objective is not to win, but to keep the ball floating and moving in an interesting pattern," in Ali's words—extends to Ali and Kit Yi's collaborative projects with collectors. In 2015, Kit Yi was selected to participate in The Arctic Circle residency, an annual three-

week expedition that invites scientists, architects, educators and artists to live aboard a sailing vessel in the Arctic Ocean. Before Kit Yi embarked on her journey, Ali gave collectors the chance to commission a series of performances based on a date during Kit Yi's residency, and an unusual word and color, which they picked. Photographs of the performances, generated by the patrons' chosen combinations and enacted by Kit Yi during her trip, were then displayed in "Futures, Again" at P! in 2017. Unsold time slots were marketed as memories to be fulfilled at a later date; making the exhibition, in a way, an archive of both past and future. In *Parallel Memory, October 27, 2015* (2017), for instance, Kit Yi's photograph of a mountain range in the Arctic town of Longyearbyen is duplicated. Each image is mounted onto a panel of a sliding window. Etched on the glass on the left is a poem Kit Yi composed, recalling her observations on that particular day in 2015. On the right is space for the yet-to-be-made work. As far as business-savvy Ali is concerned: "We borrow everything from the time yet to come, and perhaps history is the interest rate," adding that Kit Yi's inclination for working with images-within-images and duality, too, is natural in this sense. "All our passions and opinions, with all their variations, mutual influences and contradictions, are simultaneously present in us at every moment."

Kit Yi became acutely aware of the vulnerability of archives after witnessing scientists extracting data from ice cores during her residency, and, later, reading about the possible destruction of the United States' ice-core libraries due to President Donald J. Trump's cuts in research funding. Most recently, she has been working on fulfilling Ali's commitments to patrons who donated their genetic codes as part of her ongoing project *Magic Wands, Batons and DNA Splicers* (2018–). The work examines the vague, legal term "in perpetuity," as well as myths for life-extending elixirs and DNA alterations. With this motive to probe and humanize the definition of "forever," Kit Yi will encode her 99-year-artwork-leasing agreements onto the DNA strands of cancer cells, which have longer lifespans than healthy cells. It's unclear whether or not this will be feasible. Yet Kit Yi is forged by uncertainties. And, besides, as Ali proposed in as many words—the future is now.

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